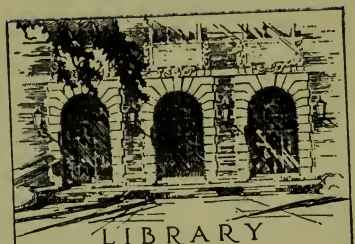
The Weaker Vessel

D. Christie Murray



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THE WEAKER VESSEL

THE WEAKER VESSEL

BY

D. CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF 'JOSEPH'S COAT,' 'RAINBOW GOLD,' 'AUNT RACHEL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

VOL. II.

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

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CHAPTER XVI

CALLING one evening at Cromwell Terrace, about a fortnight after the incident just recorded, I found Miss Delamere alone. I had not the slightest doubt in the world that she understood perfectly well the reasons for my frequent visits there, and yet I was too shy to ask if Clara were at home. She held me mischievously in suspense for a time.

'Do you know,' she asked at length, 'that we have a visitor here? A lady arrived this afternoon to whom I expect you to pay great attentions. I want you very much to impress her favourably. In point of fact,' she added laughingly, 'I expect you to pay court to her with great assiduity.'

I said something to the effect that her wishes were likely to be disappointed; but she shook her head at this, with a perfect decision of certainty.

'You will no sooner have seen this lady,' she told me, 'than you will make love to her. You will endeavour, by every means in your power, to ingratiate yourself in her favour.'

'Because you wish it?' I inquired.

'Not in the least because I wish it,' she answered enigmatically, 'though I do wish it, all the same.'

Whilst I was still wondering who this visitor might be, and for what object I was expected to be unusually polite and amiable to her, the door opened, and Clara entered with her arm about the waist of a lady of five-and-forty, whom I at once recognised from her portrait and from her likeness to Clara. Mrs. Grantley had snow-white hair, and at a little distance looked much older than she really was. But she had bright eyes, perfect teeth, and a dazzling natural complexion

which made her, when seen near at hand, look much younger than she really was. She had something of the air of a pretty woman of eight-and-twenty masquerading as a matron.

I was introduced to her, and was cordially enough received, though the politeness of her demeanour barely seemed to cover the particular closeness of the scrutiny to which I was subjected. The bright eyes travelled swiftly and decisively all over me, and I felt as if I were being weighed in the balances, and, in all respects, found wanting. We our sat down together and talked. I was aware of a desperate attempt on the part of Clara and Miss Delamere to put me at my ease, and I am sure that if no such attempt had been made I should have got there much earlier than I did. Clara was in a state of such high good spirits, and was withal so shy and discomposed by moments, that I was sure that mamma had already been taken into confidence.

In a while I grew to be more myself, and

the remainder of the evening passed agreeably enough. I was invited to luncheon on the morrow, but I had no opportunity of seeing Clara alone that evening. She and her mother retired early whilst I was saying my good-byes to Miss Delamere; and Mary, who was looking brighter and happier than I had seen her for a long time, took me gently to task as to my *gaucherie* in the earlier part of the evening.

'Pray,' I besought her, 'never try to put me at my ease again. There is nothing in the world so disconcerting.'

She laughed at this, but promised, and I went away, cheered by her assurance that I had not made an unfavourable impression. This comfortable belief did not linger long. As I walked homeward I recalled everything that had been said and done, and remembered how I had been silent in the wrong places and talkative in the wrong places. I reconstructed the whole conversation of the evening half a score of times, and came

through triumphantly, delivering myself of the most profound and brilliant observations, and covering myself with glory. Then once (to the profound astonishment of a lounging cabman on his box) I moaned aloud to think that my actual conduct had been so far removed from my ideal. I pursued this dreary and unprofitable exercise through half the night, and when I got to sleep dreamed that I had fallen so completely under the bane of Mrs. Grantley's disapproval that she was actually on her knees before Mr. Delamere, begging him, with tears, to use his influence in placing me in an asylum. Mr. Delamere declined, but Jones came suddenly from nowhere, and offered smilingly to do the thing at once, taking so evident a pleasure in it that my indignation awoke me. The satire of my dream was so far overdone that it did much to restore my equilibrium. Things would hardly come to that pass, I thought, and fell to sleep again, a little comforted.

I had never, so far as I can remember, been once assailed until now by the temptations of the demon of dandyism. But in the morning I was profoundly exercised as to my choice of garments, and I spent a good quarter of an hour amongst my neckties. When I was at last attired to my own complete dissatisfaction it was time to start, and too late to change anything.

Mrs. Grantley was just as amiable and just as watchful as she had been on the previous evening. She had impressed me from the first as a person of unusual resolution and decision; but I was hardly prepared for the exhibition of those qualities which she almost immediately afforded me.

'You and Miss Delamere,' she said, addressing Clara after luncheon, 'are going out shopping together? So I understood. Mr. Denham, I am sure, will be good enough to take care of me for a little time. I am going for a walk in the park, Mr. Denham.'

I signified my assent with what I am afraid must have been a suspicious promptitude; but I saw Clara looking piteously at me through the glass with 'clasped, petitioning hands.' The glance and the attitude seemed to prophesy the ordeal to which I was about to be subjected, and for a moment I felt horribly nervous and depressed—very much, I fancy, as a physical coward would feel on being told off for a forlorn hope. In a minute or two I had rallied so far as to assure myself that Mrs. Grantley could hardly be in a greater hurry than I was to arrive at an understanding.

The girls went away together, and did not return. Mrs. Grantley disappeared for a minute only, and came back looking very young and charming, with her white hair concealed beneath her bonnet. We set out together in the early afternoon sunshine, and talked of trifles until we reached the park. There she chose seats in a secluded place, and opened her maternal batteries at once

with a self-possession which I envied, but could not imitate.

'I want to speak to you, Mr. Denham,' she said, 'very seriously.'

I murmured something about being completely at her service, and awaited the instant massacre of my hopes.

'It seems,' she began, 'to be a recognised thing in the minds of Miss Delamere and my daughter that some understanding exists between you and Clara. Now, as Clara's mother, it is my duty to tell you that no understanding can possibly exist between you two young people as yet.'

If she had been less brusque and straightforward it would certainly have been the worse for my self-possession. But her very outspokenness helped me to be at ease. I assured her that I did not as yet expect to secure any promise, and that I had not attempted to secure it.

'That is all very well, Mr. Denham,' the lady answered. 'I ought to have

known better than to leave Clara so long alone under the guardianship of a girl so little older than herself. I am not going to blame anybody for the consequences of my own indiscretion; but I must tell you, Mr. Denham, that I do not think you have behaved at all well in this matter.'

I could not see this, and I said as much, with great respect and diffidence.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Denham,' said Mrs. Grantley, 'you have not behaved well. You have been paying constant and marked attention to a young and inexperienced girl, without the knowledge and consent of her one natural guardian. Now I know all about the affections, and the heart, and that sort of thing, and I know that it is quite possible for a boy and girl to think that the world is coming to an end and the sun going to be extinguished because a girl has a sensible mother; but my duty is to see to Clara's happiness, her solid, lasting

happiness, and not to encourage a mere whim.'

If I have not made it clear by this time that I was at this period of my life a hypersensitive and abnormally shy young man, I have very insufficiently indicated my own most striking characteristics. But I woke up here. I cannot recall the words I used, and I dare say that a great deal of what I said would sound exaggerated and romantic if it were written down. I hope so. It is no part of the business of a lad in love with an angel to have the reason and measurement in terms of middle age. I told her, I remember, amongst other things, to consider what a beautiful and charming girl Clara was. In the frank simplicity and boyishness of this declaration I had, Heaven knows, no faintest idea of diplomacy, and yet I could hardly have done better if I had been the cleverest diplomat alive. I warmed to that entrancing theme and poured my heart out, and I know now that mamma was by

no means displeased at my eulogy. Then I went on, as I recall, to say that I was not anybody in particular up till that time, but that I meant, if only time were allowed me, to be somebody very particular indeed. I would work and fight the world, and wait. I asked nothing but that she should not come between us, that she should give me opportunity to strive to become worthy of a life-partnership with all those excellencies I had so warmly pictured.

She listened with great patience and kindness, smiling now and then, and when I had done she said—

'You talk of your ambitions. What are they? Tell me about yourself. Tell me who you are, and what you are, and what you hope to be.'

I have known men to whom a conversational overture of this kind and the chance it afforded would seem to open up a glimpse of paradise. But I entered on it mournfully, and with deep misgivings. My father, I told

her, had farmed his own land, and very little of it, in Warwickshire. In his day, my grandfather had farmed it before him, and his grandfather before him. On my mother's side there was pretty much the same tale to tell—a tale of dull respectability, extending over six or seven generations, and having its origin in fog. My parents having been gathered to their fathers years ago, my elder brother farmed the family acres, and I had a fortune of three hundred pounds a year. I had read for the bar, and expected to be called almost immediately. I had written for the magazines, and had added not less than a hundred pounds a year to my annual income for the past two years. I was preparing a book about social problems, and when I had finished my work of inquiry amongst the poor in London, I meant to go over to Paris, and there to complete the work by a study on the same lines. In the meantime I should earn more than enough to live upon, since I was promised employment in Paris by

the editor of an important London daily journal.

'Well, now, Mr. Denham,' she said, when she had heard me out, 'you see that your projects are very much in the air at present. You have been very candid, so far; let me ask you a single question: What do you know about Clara's position and prospects?'

I knew nothing whatever, and I said so. She looked at me with those bright eyes of hers, and I looked back at her in appeal and anxiety. I was not in the least thinking about Clara's position and prospects, and I suppose that she either saw as much, or thought she did. She smiled and nodded as she said—

'I am very glad of that. But my daughter, Mr. Denham, though she will never be a great heiress, will be in such a position that she will have a right to look far higher than any place you can offer her as your wife for years to come, however successful you may be. It would be cruel and useless to pre-

tend to you now that you are not honestly in love with her, but you are very young, and cannot yet be certain of yourself. Clara is still younger, and is still less likely to be certain of her own wishes. You must go out and see the world of young women, which includes a great many charming young people, and Clara must see the world of young men, which includes many eligible partners. I shall not dream of permitting an engagement between you.' And seeing that I clouded very much at this, and was indeed for the moment altogether heart-broken and desolate, she bent forward a little, and laying a pretty gloved hand upon my arm, she said kindly, 'You must not take this too much to heart. I am too worldly-wise a mother, Mr. Denham, to allow myself to seem cruel to my daughter. It will all, no doubt, depend very much upon yourself. I tell you, quite candidly, that I like you. You have modesty, candour, ambition, and good sense. I think you may make a good man, my dear. If you

do well in the world, and are of the same mind in three or four years' time, and if Clara is of the same mind in three or four years' time, you and I may have another talk which may come to an end with another answer.'

The threatened delay looked heart-breaking, but I answered that if the matter depended upon myself I knew very well what would happen, and she smiled again, rising to go.

'We have had our talk,' she said, as we walked side by side, 'and we understand each other.'

I asked if I might be allowed to see Clara, and she answered, 'Certainly.'

'But,' she added, 'it will be best that you should not see too much of each other.' She added, seeing that I was newly downcast, 'Now, come, Mr. Denham, let us be sensible people. Suppose you see Clara now and tell her what I have said, and anything in your own behalf you please.' Her voice was laughing here, as if she could guess pretty

fairly what that anything else would be. 'And suppose you say good-bye for three months. You will admit that if your affection cannot endure a three months' absence, it is a great deal less robust than you fancy it. Suppose you agree to meet not oftener than once in three months, after that, until you have begun to do something which will really confirm my good opinion of you. Suppose that, if that time should come, we enter on a new arrangement. Come, now, that ought to stimulate you to effort, and if you two young people are really and seriously attached to each other, the best thing for both of you will be that you shall get to work in earnest.'

I admit that it all sounds reasonable and kindly now, but it was different then, and, not to put it too strongly, was like the reading of a warrant of despair. We walked back together, Mrs. Grantley and I, and Clara and Miss Delamere arriving shortly after us, we sat down to tea. I tried to behave rationally

and bravely, but in spite of my best efforts, my manner depressed Clara. After tea we were left alone together. I told her everything, and we sat hand in hand and cried a little, like the foolish tender-hearted children that we were, and dried one another's eyes, and vowed never and never and never to forget or change. I have sometimes been happy since that heart-broken evening, I may have been actually happier once or twice, but not oftener. I find Mrs. Denham of the same opinion when I consult her memories, and whether in the course of time this will enable us to be worldly-wise with our own children I cannot guess. I only know that if that blessed evening were to be counted sorrowful, I would ask nothing better than to be sorrowful all my days. We were parting for three months. Dim were the depths of that great gulf of time; far and far away through the mist of tears we saw firm land again beyond it, the land of promise, shining in a misty brightness. But, in the meantime,

we sat side by side, hand clasping hand, and our arms about each other, and I told her how dearly I loved her; and she, in the sweet pain of that parting, banished all shyness and told me how dearly she loved me; and Heaven knows that if any foolish pair of people on whom the sun shone that day were happy whilst thinking themselves heartbroken, we were they.

CHAPTER XVII

I TOOK a precipitate determination to start at once for Paris, and there to set on foot my researches for the second part of that volume which was to shake the pillars of social order in the two great centres of civilisation. Since further meetings with Clara were for the time being forbidden me, I felt as if I could not bear to be near her. The barrier of distance seemed essential to even a bearable misery. Of course I was no sooner denied the house than I began to desire to go there with greater frequency than ever. So long as I had been free to call I had contented myself with visits of a ridiculous frequency, and now my thought tended in that direction every waking moment, and my

feet led me thither every evening of the week.

Perhaps if Pole had been in town I might have confided my sorrows and hopes to the ear of friendship. As it was I had no confidant, and managed somehow to consume my own smoke in a fairly successful manner. But I used to wander up and down outside the house in the darkness watching the shadows on the windows, and the light in the chamber which I knew to be hers, making vows and protestations and verses, and generally enjoying myself profoundly with a rooted conviction that I was the unhappiest dog alive.

It was evident that all this had to come to an end, and so I determined straightway upon the commencement of my Parisian campaign. I went to see my friend the editor, and found my arrival timed most fortunately. I learned that there was a thoroughly experienced person in charge of the Paris office. Within his own limits this

gentleman was perfectly trustworthy, and in all matters of routine and technique I was instructed to rely upon him implicitly. His colleague, a young fellow of unusual brilliance, had disappeared under circumstances not altogether creditable to himself, and since I was prepared to start at once, I was to be allowed to fill his place on trial. If my work proved to be satisfactory I was promised a permanent engagement. The salary offered was not large, as salaries go nowadays, but it trebled my expectations at the time, and I closed eagerly with the offer. The post offered me double advantages. The salary was large enough to permit me, by extreme modesty of living, to save one half of it, and my position as a recognised journalist would immensely facilitate the inquiries I desired to make. I wrote off at once to Mrs. Grantley, informing her of this unexpected stroke of good fortune, and I wrote my good-bye for the time being to Pole. Then I packed up my belongings, gave instructions for the re-

letting of my chambers, and started with all manner of tender regrets and high ambitions for the French capital.

The cheapest route to Boulogne was by the London boat, and in pursuit of economic resolutions formed beforehand I embarked upon it. There was nobody to see me off, and I felt desolate and exiled before the boat had left the quay. The bell was ringing, friends of intending travellers were saying their last good-byes and hurrying ashore, handkerchiefs were waving, and final messages were being shouted from deck to platform, and back again, as though we were bound for a voyage to the Antipodes, when suddenly I recognised a familiar face, and Mr. Goldsmith, with a black-glazed portmanteau in his hand, came dashing through the crowd, stumbled down the gangway and reached the deck. He had only just set foot upon the boat when the gangway was slipped up from behind him. He set down his portmanteau, mopped his countenance with

a gorgeous silk handkerchief, and gazed about him with a renewal of that beaming complacency which had marked him at the beginning of our acquaintance. He was magnificently attired in, I think, the check suit of the largest pattern and vividest colours I had ever, until that hour, beheld. He wore an embroidered waistcoat, with a great gold cable across it, which for size and weight would have served admirably to attach a horse to his manger; and he wore rings outside his gloves, and a pin with a horseshoe head, a size or two smaller than the original, and set full of brilliants, which, if they had been real, might have excited the cupidity of everybody on board. I believe that if fashion had only afforded him the least warranty for it, he would have gone about with a jewelled ring in his nose, like some imaginable Crœsus of a porker.

He did not observe me for some time, and I had time to observe one proceeding of his which interested me more than a little.

He had three or four rings outside his gloves already, and when once the boat had started he retired to a position where he fancied himself safe from intruding glances, and there drew forth from his purse a little tissue-paper packet containing half a dozen others. These he put on with an admirable slyness, and having demurely admired them, turned round and swaggered across the deck, coaxing his black little moustache, and adjusting that monumental horseshoe pin for their display.

At first I was not sorry to be unobserved by him, for I felt somehow as if his splendours were likely to be reflected upon anybody whose acquaintance he might claim, and fancied I might find that glory a thought too obtrusive to be easily endured. In a while, however, I began to feel ashamed of this sentiment, and purposely put myself in a position in which he might see me if he chose to do so. He very soon remarked me, and as I chanced to be looking in his

direction at that moment, I got something of a start. He positively jumped when he saw me, and his face, which had worn its very brightest and most self-approving smile until that moment, suddenly clouded over. A moment later he came up to me with a forced manner and accosted me.

'Who'd have thought of seeig you here?' he asked in anything but a gracious tone. I remarked that it was no unusual thing in travelling to meet a man whom one had met before. He grunted a sort of unamiable assent to this, and asked where I was going. To Paris, I told him. He looked at me, as I fancied, with some suspicion, and moved away rather abruptly.

It happens often enough, in the course of everybody's experience, that after-events set so clear a light upon trifles that we suppose ourselves to have observed them keenly at the time of their occurrence. It is quite probable that, if I had had no particular cause for recalling Goldsmith's suspicious

glance, I should never have given it a second thought. And now, after the lapse of more than twenty years, I can see the fat little man peering shrewdly at me as clearly as if he were before me at this instant. 'What the deuce are you going to Paris for?' said the beady eye, as plainly as if the question had been asked in words. Some foolish notion of Goldsmith's myrmidons having watched me, and of his suspecting me of watching him in return, assailed my mind, demanding only to be laughed at and dismissed. We sat next to each other at table at dinner-time, and since there was no other English-speaking person within conversational distance of him he talked to me. He drank champagne at the meal, and took a good deal of it, so that before we left the table he was a little flushed and inclined to be amiably merry. He was going, he said, speaking more through his nose than usual, to have a bit of fun in Paris. He was going to do a bit of business too, he told me, wink-

ing one beady eye after the other with an ineffable knowingness. He had a client in Paris, so he said, and he put a certain air of arrogance into this statement as if the fact entitled him to uncommon consideration.

'She's a lady, my boy,' he said, slapping me boisterously on the shoulder. 'Wod of these days she'll occupy wod of the highest social positions. She'll bake a doise id the world too. You see if she don't. Bark by words,' he continued, poking me in the ribs with friendly familiarity, 'that wobad will bake a doise id the world.'

I said I hoped his expectations would be gratified.

'Do you?' he demanded. 'Now do you really, Bister Dedhab? Upod by word, that's very kide of you. I'm very much obliged to you, I am, upon my living word of honour.'

I attributed the fervour of his gratitude for this not too-effusive expression of good-will chiefly to the champagne he had taken;

but the exciting effect of the wine did not remain long upon him, and five minutes later, after having strutted up and down the deck smoking a cigar, he came back to me with a complete sobriety of demeanour.

'I've been down to Kensal Green,' he said, 'within the last day or two, and I've seen the monument Pole has put up to his wife. To tell you the truth, I didn't expect he'd do as little as that for her. She was an awful trouble to him, I've no doubt, and I dare say he's pretty glad to have seen the last of her.'

I did not care to enter into a discussion upon Pole's feelings with Mr. Goldsmith, and therefore kept silence.

'I dare say,' he went on, 'he's told you a lot about her, and there's no mistake about her having been a tartar. I wasn't tied to her in any way, but bless your heart alive, she used to make my life a burden to me.'

Still I said nothing, but Mr. Goldsmith

having once made conversational overtures was not to be silenced by silence.

'I saw by this morning's papers,' he continued, 'that old Lord Worborough's very ill again. I suppose the old boy is on his last legs, or pretty nearly. Bister Pole 'll tubble id to a good thing when his lordship goes off the hooks. He'll be getting married again, I shouldn't wonder, after a time. I think he's had his eye on a suitable party for some time past, down Cromwell Terrace way.'

'Mr. Goldsmith,' I rejoined, 'I am very much delighted by your society, and very proud of it. But I would rather lose it altogether than continue the discussion of this theme.'

'Oh, that's all right,' responded Mr. Goldsmith. 'I dever object to a man being a bit close about his friend's affairs or his own. I'm pretty close myself, when I want to be. I'm ready to supply anybody with the small change of codversation to any amount, but if I'm asked for the fiver of fact

I wadt five quid id exchage for it, money down. Only, you know, I happen to have had idstructions to keep an eye on Mr. Pole's proceedings. His wife was very jealous, poor thing, and I think between ourselves, Mr. Denham, she had a little bit of reasod for it.'

'I think, Mr. Goldsmith,' I answered, rather coldly, 'that I know Mr. Pole somewhat better than yourself. I can tell you at least that there never was the slightest reason for it.'

I was half sorry a moment later to have taken the trouble to make this disclaimer in my friend's behalf. It was certainly little worth while to defend Pole to a man like Goldsmith. It might have been worth while, perhaps, whilst that sorrowful wife of Pole's was still alive, and Pole and Goldsmith were compelled to hold some sort of communion with each other. Now, I knew very well that Pole cared as little to have his honour vindicated here as he would have

cared to have his height and weight proclaimed in the interior of China.

'Oh!' said Goldsmith, 'you're a bit of an innocent, my boy. Excuse me for sayig so, but that's the fact. I don't suppose that Mr. Pole meant mischief——'

'Now, Mr. Goldsmith,' I broke in, very decidedly, 'I have already asked you not to talk to me about this matter. There is more water here than was near us on a certain memorable occasion when you introduced this topic about this time last year.'

'Oh,' said Goldsmith, 'if you're going to talk like that I've got nothing to add to the observatiods I've made already. I'll tell you what—I'll toss you for a braddy and soda. I'll toss you for a soverid. Come now! I always lose when I challage a man, and so there's a bit of a chadce for you.'

How could a student of human nature be continuously wroth with Mr. Goldsmith? I never paused to analyse his charm, but sooner or later it asserted itself in almost all

our interviews. The fact that I detested brandy and soda, and the other fact that I could not afford to toss for sovereigns with Mr. Goldsmith, debarred me perhaps from the full enjoyment of his society. But even as things were, I was more than contented with him. One paid a certain toll, to be sure, and I was ashamed of being ashamed to be seen with him. There is no perfect pleasure in this world.

Pole would have silenced the little man in a minute, but there was no terror in my threats, and but little force for him in my refusal to talk about the topic on which his heart was obviously set. The only thing I could do was to refrain from answering him. Now and again I checked him, but I only drove him for a moment to a divergence from the route, and if he went out on one side he came in on the other like a conversational harlequin. He hastened me to my cabin by an hour or so, and in the bustle of landing in the morning I saw but little

of him. He went on to Paris by first class, and I, for economy's sake, travelling second, we met only at the Gare du Nord whilst our baggage was under examination. He had some little difficulty with one of the examiners, and called upon me to interpret for him.

'I've been over here time and again,' he remarked, 'but I never took the trouble to pick up the parly-voo lidgo. Stupid lot these Frenchmen are. Think of a crowd of grown-up chaps like these not knowing how to speak Iglish! I get on very well among 'em. Whedever I want to buy anything I put down less than the thing would cost in Iglad, and potter out the coppers till they've got enough. Sometimes they get tired of asking for more. I come through it pretty well. They can see I'm a foreigner, and they take pity on me because I'm yug and iddocent.'

He accompanied and followed this statement with a meteoric shower of winks, and his bag having by this time received its

cabalistic chalk mark, he bade me good-bye and disappeared. I drove to a little hotel I knew in the Rue Richelieu, and having bargained there for *pension* at eight francs per diem, took up my quarters in a lofty garret. I saw my luggage safely bestowed, dined, and walked towards the Boulevard.

How intimately I recall the night, and my own sensations as I wandered up and down! How alone I felt, how tender, how valiant, how resolved! What flashes of enthusiasm assailed my spirit every here and there! I touched, in passing, or seemed to touch, the spirits of great men who had trodden these pavements long ago, and of others who were alive and familiar with them at that hour. I sent out my whole heart to the girl I left behind me, with so much warmth and sincerity that I thought my feeling needs must reach her, and its voice find an echo in her mind.

And so to bed, as Pepys says, to feel the whole great city palpitating round me,

a mystery to be known, a problem to be solved, a fortress to be stormed. One of my last unmixed joys in London had been to accompany Clara to the English opera at Covent Garden. Sims Reeves had sung that night in Macfarren's *Robin Hood*, and almost the last thing in my mind on that first night in Paris was the memory of the rejoicing lines and the triumphant voice—

> 'I know that love will lead me right,
> With such a prize in view,
> And happy omens bless my sight,
> That must, that shall, be true.'

Ay me! I had a vague and general notion through it all that my lot was not a happy one, and it seemed that I had to face the future with a bold heart to dare to look at it at all. I am (I own it with a humble heart, knowing my own poor deserts better than my most censorious neighbours) blessed beyond the average of men, yet if I could I would go back to those happy, happy, troubled times, and never ask to leave them.

CHAPTER XVIII

I HAD been about two months in Paris, burrowing into all manner of odd corners, and picking up all manner of strange acquaintances, when I received a letter from Clara. It came in a fat and bulky envelope, and consisted of no fewer than ten sheets of foreign letter paper, which were covered on both sides. In some wonderment at the voluminous nature of this epistle I locked myself in and sat down to read it.

'MY DEAR JOHN,' it ran, 'Mr. Delamere was making a great preachment here the other night to mamma and Mary and myself about the rights of insurrection, and the only part I remember of it was that he laid it

down as an indisputable proposition that anybody who rebelled without succeeding was wicked, and that anybody who rebelled successfully was worthy of all admiration. I took this lesson upstairs with me, and laid it to heart. I counted the chances, and then I rebelled. The rebellion has succeeded completely, and now, if you please, I claim to be worthy of your admiration.

'I had long been wishing to write to you, and mamma was very strongly against it. If ever I come to be a charming old lady and have a headstrong girl to manage, I dare say I shall come round to mamma's present opinions. But being myself the headstrong girl at present, and having to manage the charming old lady, I retain my own. She really is the most charming old lady in the world, and I tell you so with perfect frankness, because she has made it a condition of her surrender that she shall read whatever I write before it is posted. Mamma has been spoiled by

flattery all her life, but is still open to its influences.

'I suppose that you will begin to get melancholy about it if I tell you that I am in the highest possible spirits; but as a matter of fact I am. We have been playing and witnessing the loveliest high comedy here ever since your departure. Mr. Jones, to use your friend's delightful expression, has been Sebastian Dolmering about the house in the most artistically inspired manner ever since you saw the last of it. We know now that he made a formal proposition to Mr. Delamere for the hand of his daughter. How stately that sounds, to be sure! Mr. Delamere appears to have given the word of command for the siege of the citadel, and Mr. Jones has been sitting down before it ever since. Mary used to have a much loftier opinion of Mr. Delamere's godson than I have ever found myself able to rise to. My wings always refused to carry me on that flight, though I really did at one time flap

them quite industriously. But since the high-road of good opinion seemed likely to land Mary in the quagmire of matrimony, she does not travel on it any longer. I am told that it is a dreadfully unladylike word to use, but I will write it in letters as small as my quill can make, and you may take it for a kind of shocked whisper. I am very much of opinion that Mr. Jones is a *humbug*. I have been burning for months to say this to somebody, and now that I have it off my mind my spirits are higher than ever.

'At first I was dreadfully anxious when I heard of this terrible proposal, and for a whole day or two I was left to wonder what would happen. By and by I began to observe that the suitor was less exalted and confident than he had seemed at first, and I was sensible enough to put a sound construction upon this phenomenon. How does a phenomenon look when you put a sound construction on it? It sounds as if it would be funny, like one of Doyle's grotesque fairy-

pictures. The elder Delamere seemed to take the thing almost as much to heart as the younger one, and the pair were deliciously gloomy and stately for a time. You would have thought that papa was suffering from the same pangs of blighted affection as afflicted Sebastian, and they both bore their sorrow with such a braggadocio meekness, and so wore their hearts upon their sleeves, that no daw with a touch of human nature in her could have kept herself from pecking at them. I am afraid that I have been a great trouble to Mr. Delamere and his candidate. I am almost afraid that at times I have really meant to be, but they have been altogether too inviting to be resisted.

'Of course Mr. Delamere's suffering silence did not endure long. He talks so beautifully that he really can't help talking, and I think it a bit of a pity that he is so excellent a conversationalist. If he had not been able to talk so nicely about everything he might have seen his way to doing something. When

once the ice was broken the fountain ran for days, and everybody in the house was drenched with the noblest maxims. Mamma in particular was so wet through with them that I could not touch her without squeezing two or three to the surface. His favourite theme was the Growth of Self-will in the Young and the Falling Off of Reverence for the Parental Ideal. I am writing about it now as if it had been pure fun for everybody all along, but I assure you that it was nothing of the kind at the time. It is only in the contemplation of it now that the trouble is all over that one can see the comic side of it. I was so sorry for Mary, and so angry at that pitiless shower of words, that I sometimes found it hard to be merely civil to Mr. Delamere. The worst of it is—or perhaps it is the best of it—Mary believes in her father to such an extent that it would be quite cruel to try to lessen her opinion of him. Your friend Mr. Pole is very funny and amusing sometimes. We met him last night at the

Revels', and he was describing somebody whom I do not know. He said that this gentleman, to his wife's mind, was such a very large potato that it would break her heart to see him pared. But for this lady's affection it appears that some friend of Mr. Pole's was quite prepared to pare the potato, and, judging from what he said, to reduce its dimensions very considerably. It brought Mr. Delamere and Mary irresistibly to my mind. I do seriously believe that if it were possible to peel all the pretence off that gentleman he would make a rival to Tom Thumb.

'But now I must tell you what has really happened. I am so glad of my liberty that I have been compelled to race round in these preliminary circles before sitting down to steady narrative, like a dog just unchained, or a pigeon starting for home, which, when I come to think of it, is a prettier and more ladylike simile. Mr. Jones had actually and formally proposed, and Mary had definitely and formally declined to accept him. Mr.

Delamere, after the first frozen days of silence, had poured on us that deluge of eloquence of which I have already told you. But I have not told you that he had a second or alternative theme which dealt with The Crime of Concealment in Social Affairs. You remember something of this, but it was repeated as if its variety were as infinite as Cleopatra's, and it could neither be staled by age nor withered by custom. The text of it was, of course, afforded by your friend Mr. Pole, and I heard him preached against so often that I ended by taking a liking to him.

'And now comes the fun of the whole position. Mr. Pole stayed in the country with Lord Worborough for quite six weeks after your departure. Then he and his lordship, who is quite recovered, came up to town together, and Mr. Pole made a call at Cromwell Terrace. All this time Mary had been pumped on by the paternal pump until she could scarcely have had a dry moral thread to call her own, and she was getting

quite depressed and thin under this hydropathic treatment.

'I think Mr. Pole has very decidedly improved in appearance. He does not look so stern and stony as he used to do. He is rather grave and quiet, but I am sure that he has a great deal more humour than he shows, for I have seen his eye twinkle very often when Mr. Delamere has been talking; and I have been conscious that if anybody had caught me at the same moment they might have seen the same signs. He stayed only an hour at his first call, and on the following day he came again, bringing his lordship with him. You did not at all exaggerate when you told me what a dear old gentleman he is. I never met a lord before, to speak to, though I have looked at a whole menagerie of them through the gilded railings at Westminster, and I was a little afraid of him at first. He is old-fashioned and stately, but there is such a beautiful courtesy in everything he says and does that I think

him perfectly lovable. He is just what an old nobleman ought to be, and all our hearts went down before him like so many ninepins.

'Mr. Jones, of course, is always about the house, and he and Mr. Delamere did most of the talking. His lordship seemed extremely pleased and interested by them, and you know that when you do not get too much of them they can both be very clever and amusing.

'We were treated that night to a new lecture, and it was such an unmixed blessing to get a change from the old ones that we all welcomed it with enthusiasm. At times it was really beautiful and affecting, and it was all about the Moral Advantages of the Territorial Sentiment. On the very next day his lordship called alone, and was closeted with Mr. Delamere. Mamma and I were out at the time, and I only heard of this afterwards, but when I got home I met Mary, and I was quite certain at once that something had happened. I don't think I ever saw anybody

looking so beautiful as she did. You know what very fine and speaking eyes she has. They were all sparkling and gentle at the same time, and when I had coaxed her a little she told me that Lord Worborough had spoken to Mr. Delamere about a marriage between her and Mr. Pole. It was like the dear, stately old gentleman to come himself and to show that he approved of the match, for, of course, the future Lord Worborough will be very much above Miss Delamere in wealth and social station, though, after all, a lady can only be a lady, and Mary would have been an empress by now if emperors were sensible people.

'There are some things about which it doesn't seem the least use in the world to try to say anything. If I were trying to tell a stranger what happened next I should fall into pure despair. I know that I shouldn't succeed in conveying a shadow of the truth. But you are not a stranger, and I think that you have a little imagination. Pray let it

loose, and try to picture to yourself Mr. Delamere that evening struggling in Mr. Jones's presence with the rudiments of a new discourse on "The Blending of the Artistic and Territorial Ideals." Poor Mr. Jones was very mournful under this, and though I could not help feeling that he has made us all suffer very much by his perseverance, I was sorry for him when his ally deserted him. He still comes to the house, and Mr. Delamere and he are a great deal together; but Mr. Pole calls every day, and the poor thing must certainly be excessively uncomfortable. He does not seem to have the strength of mind to go away. I wish he would, for as it is I cannot help being a little unhappy about him at times. He dashes those high spirits I told you of, although I must confess that his airs of martyrdom are sometimes a little trying. What makes me pity him most is the altogether heartless way in which Mr. Delamere has turned upon him. Only last night we had a new discourse

on The Philosophical Acceptance of the Inevitable, which was so cruel and at the same time so funny that I really wonder how I lived through it and kept my countenance. I had to look hard at the table all the while, and I said to myself again and again that it would be most shameful to wound Mary by laughing. I succeeded in sitting through it, but I was quite hysterical in my own room afterwards.

'So now you see that, with the exception of poor Mr. Jones, everybody is happy. Mr. Delamere makes a pretence of coolness about the match, which sometimes throws a little shadow over Mary's spirits; but I can see clearly that he only does this to let himself down easily. There is no talk about an immediate marriage, and I suppose everybody feels that such a suggestion would seem a little indelicate in view of what has happened.

'And now, since I have rebelled in your behalf and my own, you must answer this,

and tell me all about yourself and your doings. I have never seen Paris, but I have read a prodigious deal about it within the last two months. I cannot imagine what it is that has made me take so sudden an interest in the French capital. Perhaps you can. I have told mamma that it is all nonsense to talk or think of my changing, and beyond that I am not going to say anything, except that I am,

'Yours,

'CLARA.'

This epistle delighted me on many grounds, selfish and unselfish. A week later I got a letter from Pole, who I suppose had been too busy in his new-found hopes of happiness to write before. I wrote back, congratulating him with all my heart, and now that a means of communication between Clara and myself had been opened up, and the one creature in the world I loved best after her was going to be happy, everything seemed bright again.

Smiling seas and a steady breeze abeam,

and gay skies and banners flying in the wind, and the gladdest music aboard, and 'Land ho!' and the sweetest bay of the land of promise reaching forth its green arms in welcome. Then a crash, and the sunken rock that no man dreamed of has rent us from stem to stern.

CHAPTER XIX

My commanding officer and colleague was Mr. Alexander MacIlray. Our office was up four pairs of stairs in the Rue de la Paix. It has very pronouncedly blossomed out since then, and nowadays its gilded signboard is visible from half-way down the Boulevard des Capucines; but at that time we were humble, and even a little Bohemian in our ways and aspect. Journalism has grown of late years into a recognised profession. One feels, in setting that statement upon paper, guilty of an actual banality; and yet, as I remember the business a quarter of a century back, it was very little of a recognised profession at all, and a vast number of its followers were harum-scarum, clever, sociable,

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lovable, and good-for-nothing people, who dressed as it pleased them, drank habitually more than was good for them, kept the insanest hours, and generally conducted themselves as though they knew they were outside the claims and privileges of ordinary society. I am of a staid and sober turn of mind, and never cared greatly for the wilder sort of revelry; but I look back with an affectionate regret to some of the old times and scenes and many of the lost faces. I dare say I am getting to be an old fogey; but I look round in vain amongst the begloved, tall-hatted, frock-coated contingent of to-day for the merriment, the jollity, the good-fellowship, the open-handedness, which went along with the ramshackle life, the billycock hat, and the smoke-scented jacket.

There never was a personage in this world less Bohemian than Mr. Alexander MacIlray. He was a particularly respectable Scot, who dressed uniformly in black, and whose gloves and linen were always perfectly clean and

orderly. He seemed never to go anywhere unless called thither by affairs, and he lived without friends or acquaintances outside his business. He was by no means an ungenial little man, but he was always occupied, out of the hours of actual work, in 'getting his tools together,' as he phrased it.

'The besiness of a journalist, Mr. Denham, is to know everything that is to be known. Univairsal knowledge is perhaps empossible, is, in fact, empossible, for the endividual, but the mere truth that a theng is empossible has no right to debar a man from attempting it. Get your tools in order, Mr. Denham. Know everything that ye can lay your mental hand upon.'

He broke out on me with this before I had known him for a week, and repeated it constantly with unction, and sometimes with a startling air of originality, as if the thought had just occurred to him and he was in haste to express it before it vanished. He had an odd way of expressing sympathy and a sense

of companionship. Sometimes when we had been sitting silent for an hour or more, each engaged in his own task, he would push his work aside, and gazing at me in a friendly fashion through his gold-rimmed glasses, would smooth his red hair with both hands and say, 'Ay, ay, Mr. Denham! Ay, ay, lad! Ay, ay!' in a tone of cheerful certainty and conviction. Then he would turn-to again at his task of getting his tools together. I suppose he got too many tools together, and so filled his mental workshop that he had no room to move about in it. He himself did next to nothing with the paraphernalia he collected. He used to remind me sometimes of some imaginable frantically-generous ironmonger, who kept a prodigious stock of every sort of implement for every trade beneath the skies, knew the practical handling of no one of them, and gave away his stock all day among the passers-by. I got to have a superstitious belief in Mr. MacIlray's omniscience. He was a walking

cyclopædia. I bepuzzled myself with problems for his puzzlement, and never caught him. People who have not met this sort of man hardly know how to believe in him. One would have thought that nothing less than a lifetime would have served a man to learn Paris, for instance, as MacIlray knew it.

'When I first came to this cetty I med up my mind that it was my duty to know it. So I just set myself down in the meddle of it, and obsairved. Then, sir, in a while I began to radiate. Now, as a matter of fact and experrience, it's not that easy to radiate as ye might fancy. Ye want a heap of preliminary knowledge. I'm thenking that if a man began his denner with his cheese, and worked back his way to the soup, he'd find his digestive organs getting out of order in a whilie. There's a way of absorbing a cetty or a subject just as there's a way of absorbing your denner, and ef you take the wrong ye're like to find yourself bothered by a sperretual endigestion.'

In spite of this admirable exordium I found when I came to try him that he had formulated no scheme at all for the absorption of subject or city. He used to stand in that overcrowded warehouse of his, and survey his tools with a constant satisfaction, and used to lay down philosophical theories beyond counting for the increase of his armoury, and at first I used to wait for the announcement of some great task, some Herculean feat of letters or of learning to which he had set himself single-handed. The revelation never came.

He was a simple-minded little man, in spite of all his learning, and he had a boyish enthusiasm of admiration for faculties which lay outside his own range. He could flow out, measureless, upon paper, not in a stream which went anywhere, but in a sort of bog of mingled thought and fact over which no man could travel dryshod. But to get the gist of a thing inside the journalistic nutshell was altogether impossible for him, and since I was

not long in perceiving the necessity of the trick, and speedily acquired the knack itself, he used to admire me in a way so candid and open that I blushed before him.

'Ay, lad!' he would say, 'ye have but to get your tools together, and ye'll make a workman.' Then he would go to his own labours, or dive into the packed intricacies of his inward storehouse, and would emerge an hour later with a cheerful 'Ay, ay, Mr. Denham! Ay, ay, lad! Ay, ay!' as if I had said something to elicit his most cordial sympathies.

He worked up four pairs of stairs in the Rue de la Paix, and he lived up six pairs of stairs in an eminently respectable boarding-house in the Boulevard Haussmann. As I got to be more and more intimate with him he took very kindly to me, but it was a week or two after the reception of Clara's letter that I paid my first visit to his quarters. I had begun to think that we should never come to an end of the stairs when he paused

upon the sixth landing and threw open the door which led to a tolerably spacious and very orderly apartment. His bed was snugly tucked away in one corner, and surrounded by a screen, and a great bookcase filled the opposite wall from floor to ceiling. There was not one volume of mere entertainment on its shelves, but there were grammars and dictionaries, atlases and gazetteers, dictionaries of biographies and dates, huge bound folios of the *Entr'acte*, cobwebbed all over with shorthand criticisms of performances, volumes of history by the hundred, works on chemistry, metallurgy, conchology, and on the lower shelves a battalion of encyclopædias.

'Here are the tools for a journalist, Mr. Denham,' he said, with a subdued pride, as he saw me examining his books. 'Get the contents of those pages well into your mind, and there is no department of human effort into the consederation whereof ye will not be prepared to enter.'

I suggested that the tools were there, and

that it might suffice to take them down as they were wanted, but this seemed positively to shock MacIlray.

'Nenni, lad!' he exclaimed warmly. 'There's nothing that a man can call his own in this wide warld but that which is packed away in the head and the soul of him. Carry your weapons about with ye, and then no man can catch y'unarmed at any moment.'

I persisted in thinking that if a man would carry about with him arms enough for fifty people he might find himself embarrassed in a chance conflict which came suddenly upon him, but if my theories had been very koh-i-noors of practice it was too late to present them to MacIlray. I liked the simple-hearted, prim-spoken little book-worm very warmly, and he returned my liking. So we got on admirably together, and not infrequently I spent my evenings in his room. He gave me to understand, in a very friendly way, that I was to regard my first introduction there as a standing invitation.

'The place, such as it is, Mr. Denham, is open to ye. Wethin its compass I can say for it that ye'll find no more useful mass o' knowledge than ye see collected here. Ef ever ye're passing this way with an hour to spare and ye want to refresh your mind ye'll just walk upstairs as ef the place belonged to ye, whether I'm en or out. I'll give word to the *concierge* below stairs to that effect.'

I accepted his cordial invitation, and in a little while the house on the Boulevard Haussmann knew me almost as well as if I were an inmate.

The day before which I was forbidden by maternal authority to visit Clara came slowly nearer and more near. The nearer it grew, the more the hours lagged to my impatient fancy, but at last I stood within four-and-twenty hours of starting. I had secured a two-days' holiday, and in the afternoon—I remember that it was a Saturday, and a day of exceptional slackness—I visited Mr. MacIlray to talk over with him one or two

matters which would have to be attended to in my absence, for which no definite arrangements had been made. We talked things over, and then fell into some friendly discussion, so that I lingered for an hour or two.

We were still in the full flush and glory of the summer, but the staircases of the house were dark in places, where the illumination which struck through certain gloomy little skylights and portholes could not reach. I was half-way down when I heard the silken rustle of a dress below me, and made myself small to let the wearer pass. She was in shadow, and a narrow stream of light, with the motes dancing thickly in it, played across the dimness and half obliterated all objects which lay beyond it. I stood in a corner, and waited for a second or two whilst the wearer of the silken dress came at a very leisurely pace step by step along the stairs, until all on a sudden, with such a shock as seemed to stop my heart, I saw the face of that dead wife of Pole's spring into the radi-

ance shot across the staircase by the sinking sun. The proud, hard, disdainful eyes blinked in the sudden light, and the woman, seeing an instant later that some one stood by to make room for her, gave me a scornful, undiscerning glance from head to foot and went slowly by.

If I had not been supported by the wall I should have fallen in the horror of my amazement. I heard the silken rustle and the deliberate footstep pace the corridor above, and I heard the click of the handle of a door, and then the door itself slammed noisily. I do not know how, by any art of words, to convey to the understanding of another the sensations which assailed me. I think that amongst the chief of them was a swift and terrible certainty that nothing in the world was real, and that I was somehow sunk in the middle of an eternal emptiness of space.

When the first shock was over, I found that I was shaking from head to foot, and that my face and hands were moist. My

head was whirling so that the stairs were a kind of terror to me. I climbed to the landing, and stood there awhile, striving to collect myself, and then, rather by instinct, as I thought afterwards, than because of any definite purpose in my mind, I went back to MacIlray's room. The sound of my own knuckles as I tapped at the door, and the brusque imperativeness of his 'Entrez' in reply, did something to dissipate the still lingering sense of the general unreality of things. MacIlray told me afterwards that he had never in his life seen a face on which the expression of pure horror was fixed so vividly. I can well believe that, in the memory of the reflection of my own expression which I saw in his. He darted at me, and threw one arm about me.

'For all sakes, man,' he demanded, 'what's the matter? Where is it? Are you hurt?'

He moved me to a chair, and kneeling down beside me passed his hands over me from head to foot with a rapid, skilful-feeling

touch, like that of a practised surgeon. Then rising, and keeping a backward glance upon me, he went swiftly to a cupboard, and producing from it a bottle of cognac, poured out a wineglass full, and returning, held it to my lips. I drank it eagerly, and the spirit burned like fire and set me coughing. It steadied my nerves, however, and set my heart at work again with a more healthful action.

'Denham, my lad,' said MacIlray, standing over me, wineglass in hand, 'ye look as if ye'd seen a ghost.'

'I have,' I answered.

He stared at me in pure amazement.

'I'm a believer in many things,' he responded, 'but I'm no believer in ghosts, until I can trap one for myself, and submit him to a chemical analysis. Just think it out, lad. What is it that's scared ye?'

I made a great effort and succeeded in pulling myself together.

'I saw,' I answered, 'a minute ago, on

the stairs outside, a woman over whose grave I stood more than three months back. I had the certificate of that woman's death in my hands. I saw the tombstone erected on her grave. I myself gave the necessary orders for it, and saw them carried out.'

'You're talking naturally enough,' said MacIlray, looking at me with a shrewd inquiry. 'Are ye sure there's nothing——?' He tapped his forehead, 'Eh?'

'If,' I answered, 'I am not mad, or if—and I know better—I have not been the victim of some wild hallucination, I have seen that woman. If she is an inmate of this house you cannot fail to have noticed her.'

'Tell me what she's like,' he said.

'Dark,' I answered, 'with level black eyebrows, and full red lips. She has a swarthy pallor, and she looks at you as if she would kill you if she had the power. It's a haunting face. No man who has seen it once and taken note of it could forget it.

A cruel, proud, revengeful, self-disdainful face.'

'Ay, man,' he said, nodding at me. 'There's such a woman in the house. Madame Damal she calls herself. She's uncommonly lively in the temper for a woman that's been dead and buried.'

'Madame Damal?' I answered confusedly. 'Does she speak French?'

'Speak French?' repeated MacIlray. 'It's likely she would. She's a Frenchwoman born and bred. It's her native language. I suspect, my lad, you've just been hit by some extraordinary likeness. I confess,' he went on, as if he wished to soothe me, 'that I would not have thought that there had been two faces like that in the world. I thank my stars at least that I never saw another like it.'

'These are no two faces,' I answered obstinately; 'that woman is alive.'

'Ay, ay,' cried MacIlray, half pettishly, 'that woman *is* alive. But the dead one

isn't. I don't like these uncanny fancies, and I'll just tell ye what we'll do, lad. It's denner time in half an hour.' A bell clanged loudly through the house at this moment. 'There's the warning for it. Ye'll calm your nerves, and come down with me to denner. It happens, to my oft disturbance, that I sit opposite the lady. Ye'll have a chance for a good look at her, and ye'll sleep none the worse for being sure that you've been mistaken.'

I am half ashamed to say it, but I shrank from this ordeal with an actual terror. I fought it down, however, and resolved that I would go through with it. MacIlray fell into a reverie from which he awoke with his accustomed sonorous watchword of sympathy and approval. 'Ay, ay, Denham! Ay, ay, lad!' when the second bell rang.

'Ye're all right now, lad? Ye're not going to make an exhibition of yourself?' he asked me as we went downstairs together. I answered that he might rely upon me,

and we entered the dining-room. MacIlray, with a flourish of politeness, introduced me to the lady of the house. 'M. Denham, mon collègue, qui sera un de ces jours un homme remarquable.' This gave me something of a start, but I suspected MacIlray a moment later of a friendly intention to turn me from the contemplation of the one idea which filled my mind. He chattered with more than common fluency to the landlady, and dragged me neck and heels into the conversation.

We were amongst the first arrivals at table. By and by others came in, to the number of twenty, and we all sat down. The space opposite MacIlray was vacant, and remained vacant until the fish was served. Then the woman whom I had seen upon the stairs came in and took her seat there. I experienced no new shock, but her face held me with an urgent fascination, and I was compelled again and again, in spite of myself, to peruse every feature of her face

even when I had arrived at a fixed and rooted certainty. She spoke once or twice in the voice that I remembered, but with an accent so finished and natural that it would have been impossible to any one to whom the language had not been customary from infancy. Sometimes the intentness of my regard drew hers upon me, but she never gave me once the faintest sign of recognition. The cruel, self-despising, all-despising eyes looked straight into mine, and were withdrawn with all their old indifferent hauteur. Certain as I was of her identity, the perfect indifference of her manner shook me once or twice, and even when it made its weakest impression upon me served to sustain the tumult of my mind.

The dinner might have lasted a year rather than an hour; but at length it was over. The ladies rose and moved away. The men settled down about the windows and lit their cigarettes. MacIlray and I were left alone, and he drew me by a gesture to the far end

of the room. Standing there and looking upwards at a print, with his head critically on one side, as if he were examining it, he let fall a single word of question—

'Well?'

'That is the woman,' I responded.

'Did she ever know you,' MacIlray asked, 'in the days before she died and got buried?'

'She knew me,' I answered, 'and had reason to remember me.'

'She's a very pretty actress in that case,' he said.

I had had time to think this extraordinary matter over, and I had come to my own conclusions.

'That woman,' I said deliberately, laying a hand upon MacIlray's breast and looking him calmly in the face, 'has entered into a conspiracy with a little Jew solicitor in London to spread abroad the false intelligence of her own death, in order that her husband, whom she hates, shall be entrapped into con-

tracting a marriage with another woman. She promised in my hearing to make his life a burden to him, and this is the way in which she has chosen to make that promise good.'

I saw a change in his face as I spoke, and I saw, though I could not tell why, that he had abandoned his mistrust.

'Hold your tongue one moment, man,' he said. 'Don't speak to me. Let me think. A little Jew solicitor? An over-dressed man with white teeth. Ay, ay! He's been here.'

'His name,' I said, 'was——'

'Wait!' cried MacIlray. 'His name was'—I could see him searching in his own mind, and the light in his face told me that he had recalled it before he spoke the word —'Goldsmith.'

'That is the man,' I answered, 'and this woman is the wife, Heaven help him, of my dearest friend!'

CHAPTER XX

I REACHED London in the gray of a dismal morning, and, carrying my portmanteau with me, made my way on foot through the silent streets towards Pole's chambers. So far as I remember to have noted, nothing whatever in the aspect of the court was changed, and yet somehow all was changed. A difference had fallen upon everything, and the place had that look of unfamiliar familiarity which is the most damping and disheartening of all aspects to one who revisits old and well-remembered scenes.

The court was quiet and deserted, as was natural at that early hour. The gatekeeper slumbered in his sentry-box, outside the iron gate, and I passed through the door which

led to Pole's rooms unnoticed. I could read through the half gloom of the passage the white letters in which his name was inscribed upon the black paint of the door, and I stood indeterminately, not venturing to disturb the silence. I had spent a sleepless night and had been unhappy enough all the journey through. It was no light or pleasant task to have laid upon oneself—the task of pulling one's dearest friend's house of happiness down about his ears.

I set my portmanteau down stealthily, and sat down upon it for a time, resolved to wait. There was no use in disturbing Pole, no need to hasten the delivery of the dreadful intelligence I carried. But by and by the singing silence of the staircase, the creaking noise the old stairs made under the tread of invisible feet, and the uneasiness of my own mind, got the better of me and made my continued watch there almost an impossibility. I stole downstairs quietly, like a thief, to look at the door of my own old chambers.

An oblong streak of black paint, fresher than the rest, obliterated my name, and over it was painted that of W. Whitehouse. I shall never in the least know why, but I figured W. Whitehouse as a man in spatterdashes and a light waistcoat. He wore a white hat with a black band, and looked fast and rakish. In the absurdest vague way in the world this visionary Whitehouse seemed to double the depressing influences which already rested upon me, and I stole silently down the court again, and went back into Holborn. Signs of life were already visible there, and the few passers-by had such an interest as one feels for strangers when living in a village. Everything was comfortless: the long unbroken perspective of the streets, the white sky, the smokeless chimneys, the closed windows of shops, like dead eyes with weights upon them to keep the eyelids down. I was in a mood wretched enough to be fantastic, and weary enough to be irresponsible in fantasy.

I stood at a late coffee-stall and drank a cup of coffee, and then went back to the outside of Pole's door. I waited there until I fell into a little dreamy doze, and was awakened by the laundress, who came clanking upstairs with a broom and pail. She stared to see me, and I felt ashamed of being detected, as if I had been bound on some foolish or dishonourable enterprise.

'La! Mr. Denham,' said the laundress, 'whatever are you a-doing here, sir?'

I told her I had not cared to disturb Pole at so early an hour, and was waiting for a more seasonable time to arrive.

'Mr. Pole, sir,' she said, 'Mr. Pole is in the country. The gate-porter's got his address, and sends his letters to him regular.'

This was a respite, after a fashion, and to a very slight degree I was unreasonably lifted by it. The news had none the less to be told because of it, but the disclosure was delayed. If it had been anyhow possible to

delay it altogether it would have taken a dreadful weight from my mind, but that of course was altogether out of the question. I determined to quarter myself upon Pole in his absence; and the laundress having admitted me to his rooms I made my toilet there, and then sat down to think out what I should do. I thought it out so successfully that in five minutes I fell fast asleep. It was high noon when I awoke, cramped from my strained posture in the arm-chair. My mind was cleared and strengthened by these few hours of repose, however; and when I had ascertained from the gate-keeper who was on duty for the day that Pole was staying at Worborough Court, my own way lay quite plainly before me. I found that there was no train for the West of England until six o'clock, and since my only opportunity of seeing Clara had to be taken before that hour arrived, I started for Cromwell Terrace.

Apart from my discovery I should have had nothing but good news and high hope

to carry with me, but that discovery gave its own miserable colour to everything in my mind. I made a resolute endeavour to look bright and cheerful, and determined that I would express nothing but the most hopeful sentiments. It would be quite early enough for Mary Delamere to know that this shadow had fallen upon her way when I could no longer hide the knowledge from her. At present she lived in a happy blindness, and though she must needs soon be rudely awakened to the truth, I was glad of every minute's delay.

It appeared afterwards that Mrs. Grantley, Mary Delamere, and Clara were together at the moment when my arrival was announced, and that Clara was at once for flying to meet me, but that mamma laid restraining orders upon her. The elder lady came in alone and received me, as I fancied, with a rather icy kindness.

'I hope, Mr. Denham,' she said, 'that you have not been dissipating in Paris. You

are not looking so well as you were when you left London.'

I tried to answer this implied accusation lightly, and feeling that the attempt was a dismal failure began to look awkward and probably a little guilty. She shook her head at me severely, and said she was assured that I had been keeping abominable hours. I answered that I had travelled from Paris without pause, and was a little tired by the journey. She shook her head once more with a doubtful aspect, and drew her lips to an expression which announced plainly that I was a melancholy example. This was so bad a beginning that I was spurred to make amendment for it, and I entered upon an account of my labours and successes, which by and by became enthusiastic and carried some conviction with it. She relaxed a little, and after a quarter of an hour's talk, observing, doubtless, my frequent and eager glances towards the door, she sailed away and despatched Clara to me.

Clara was not long in remarking that I was somehow changed and depressed. She, unlike mamma, was confident that my sustained and heroic efforts in the cause of love and letters were answerable for my altered appearance. I must have been a poor dissembler, for in spite of all that I could do she found me out in the first five minutes, and was convinced that something dreadful had befallen me.

'You can't deny it, John,' she said, looking at me with frightened eyes, and holding one of my hands in both her own. 'Tell me what it is. You wicked boy! you have somehow been getting into trouble.'

That at least I could and did deny with a clear conscience. I painted my own prospects in the rosiest tints, and did my painting with so hang-dog an air that she would have been less shrewd than I knew her to be if I had succeeded in deceiving her.

'It is of no use to pretend with me,' she told me. 'You are the worst actor I ever

saw in my life. There is something on your mind. I insist either that you shall lay your hand upon your heart and declare solemnly that you have nothing in the world to be annoyed or disturbed about, or that you shall tell me what it is.'

She said this with an admirable air of lightness and vivacity, but her eyes were troubled, and she was very serious beneath her pretence of comedy. I yielded so far as to tell her that I had very disturbing intelligence, though it in no way concerned my personal affairs.

'In no way?' she demanded. 'If it doesn't concern you in any way, why should you be disturbed by it?'

'It concerns me only,' I replied, 'inasmuch as it must make others whom I value dearly very unhappy.'

Thereupon I began to feel that it was a dreadful thing to find myself in the act of wishing that the news of anybody's death should be confirmed, or regretting that the

intelligence should be disproved. Yet there was no disguising it. In all honesty the news of that wretched woman's death had brought relief to everybody concerned with her, and the certainty that the news was false would be the most dreadful blow that could possibly be inflicted upon two innocent people, who had never wished her harm or tried to wrong her. The common sense of the position was as clear as daylight, but the sentiment natural to the circumstances hung a veil before it.

'You are bound to hear the news,' I said gloomily at last, 'and my only reason for not telling it now is that I see no good in forestalling trouble for some one else who would be sure to hear it from you.'

'Who do you mean?' she asked me.

'Promise me,' I said, 'that you will keep the news to yourself, and that you will show no sign of it to anybody in this house.'

'In this house?' she repeated. I nodded

in answer, and she, seizing my arm nervously with both hands, looked at me for a second or two in an alarmed perplexity. 'You have bad news for Mary,' she said then, with eyes suddenly widened with terror. 'You have heard something about Mr. Pole. What is the matter with him?'

'His wife,' I answered, 'is alive. I saw her the night before last in Paris.'

Clara sprang to her feet with clasped hands, and a cry of dismay and terror. Before the words had well left my lips I had seen the handle of the door turn, and before I could make a sign to repress the ejaculation which burst from her lips the door opened, and the surprised face of Mary Delamere appeared at the entrance to the room. Clara heard the opening door, and turning, made an impetuous movement towards her friend.

'What is it?' cried Miss Delamere, advancing swiftly. Clara and I stood miserably silent before her, looking help-

lessly one at the other. Some sort of explanation was unescapable.

'I am the bearer of strange news,' I said. 'Clara was startled by it.'

To say that Clara was startled was but feebly to describe her condition. She had grown deathly pale, and so trembled from head to foot that she could hardly stand. Mary set an arm about her waist, and led her to an arm-chair, and there knelt beside her.

'Give me a glass of water, Mr. Denham,' she said quietly. 'There is a carafe on the sideboard.'

I obeyed her, and Clara sipped the proffered water and dropped a tear or two into the tumbler. Then she handed the glass to me with an appearance of recovering her composure, and suddenly crowned my misery by bursting into tears with her arms about Mary's neck.

'I think you had better leave us for a moment, Mr. Denham,' said Miss Delamere,

looking round upon me with a glance of keen inquiry.

'No!' cried Clara. 'You mustn't go away, John. You must stay here. I was surprised and shaken at first, but I am better now.' She composed herself by an obvious effort and, embracing Mary anew, begged her to leave the room for a minute or two. 'John,' she said, 'has brought very strange news indeed, if it should prove to be true. But it is not yet proved to be true, and I am not going to distress those who love me for what may be only a fancy. Go away, dear, for a little while, and let me find out whether I really have anything to be afraid of. You need not look that way at John, Mary.' She tried to say this with an air of merriment, which threatened for a moment to result in hysteria. 'It is no fault of his, even if the thing is true.'

She threw her arms about Miss Delamere again, and embraced her almost convulsively. Then she half led and half pushed

her from the room, and closing the door, turned towards me with a white but resolute face.

'What do you know?' she asked, twining her fingers hard together. 'Tell me what you know.'

I told her in as few words as I could find of my visit to MacIlray, my encounter with Mrs. Pole upon the staircase, and of her manner at the dinner-table. She was deeply impressed at first, but when I mentioned my own bewilderment at the change of name the woman had adopted, and at the complete purity of her French accent, I could see Clara's face brightening.

'You have been frightened by a resemblance,' she said.

'No,' I answered, 'the thing is only too certain.' And I went on to tell of MacIlray's identification of the little Jew solicitor. Her face fell again, and I saw that she shared my own certainty, though she strove to combat it. She was evidently resolved to be

calm and strong, though in spite of herself her voice trembled as she spoke.

'What are you going to do?' she asked.

'I am going,' I answered, 'in the first place to telegraph to Paris to say that my return to-morrow is impossible. Next, I am going down by the six-o'clock train to Exeter. I shall wire to Pole to meet me there. I shall tell him the story, and leave him to act upon it as he may see fit.'

'I suppose,' she said, 'he will see fit to go to Paris, but that woman, if she is really Mrs. Pole, is not likely to be in the same house when you get there. Wire to your friend Mr. MacIlray, and tell him to have her movements watched. She would be at least as certain to know you as you were to know her. You did not disguise yourself by speaking an unexpected language.'

Now I had done nothing but chase up and down in my own mind the sensible, necessary, and practical things to do, and yet it had never occurred to me to think

that the woman on whose identification everything depended might choose to complicate our difficulties by evading inquiry. Yet, directly the thought was suggested to me I saw that there was nothing more certain in the world. The chances against her lying there waiting to be caught were a million to one. I was for starting at once to repair my stupidity as far as possible by a telegram to MacIlray when Clara bade me wait a moment, and rang the bell.

'We will see Mary together before you go,' she said, with a self-possession which did her infinite credit in my eyes. 'She will be less likely to be alarmed or disturbed if she knows that we have come to an understanding to do something, and if we seem to put a bold front upon the matter. A day or two is not much, John, but I should value a day or two's ignorance if you and I were going to be parted.'

The maid, appearing in answer to the bell, was instructed to summon Miss Dela-

mere, and a minute later Mary entered the room. Clara, who was by this time quite mistress of herself, relieved me of the task of explanation.

'We have talked things over,' she began, with her arm about the other's waist, and looking at her with a smiling, mournful tenderness. 'John has brought very serious and surprising news, but we are not yet certain that it is true. We can know all about it if we exercise a little patience; and he is going to make inquiries.'

'If the news is bad news, dear,' said Miss Delamere, 'I hope it may be contradicted. If it is very bad news I am sure you bear it bravely, and I am sure you will bear it bravely, even should it prove to be true.'

'I should never bear trouble so well as you would,' Clara answered. There was a meaning in her words for her and me which could hardly be expected to reach Miss Delamere's mind. 'We must dismiss all thought of this,' Clara continued, 'until we

hear decisively; and you must promise not to ask any questions about it until I speak of it again.'

The promise was given, and, as I knew afterwards, was kept, though one hears occasionally of feminine curiosity, and there was probably enough here to excite it to considerable activity. I took my leave almost at once, and went off to despatch my telegrams. I delayed my message to Pole until I could lay hands upon a Bradshaw, and could find in its pages the name of an hotel in Exeter. I found what I wanted at an old-fashioned tavern where I made a pretence of dining. Then I sent off my message, making it as urgent as I could without expressing Pole's actual concern in the affair, and took the evening express.

CHAPTER XXI

It was dusk already within the limits of the station, but the train glided into a new day outside, and the autumn sunlight was clear and beautiful. Once beyond the line of houses, and rushing through the peaceful fields, I surrendered myself to the contemplation of the scenery with that curious indifference which I suppose everybody has experienced at times of mental tension or trouble. I remember that when, years before this story opened, I was awaiting news of my mother, who lay in the room above me, hovering between life and death, my whole heart and thoughts were concentrated on the effort to set a flower-jar in the exact middle of the window-sill it stood on.

Nothing in the world seemed to me so important as a mathematical accuracy in that poor achievement. As I rode westward I recalled that episode in my history, and likened my present condition of mind to my feelings of that hour, so that I was able to know that I was less indifferent than I felt. There was a gorgeous sunset, which gilded all the fields and made the face of one of my fellow-passengers glow like hot metal, burnished. Then the night came down. My fellow-travellers left me midway in the journey, and I tried to compose myself for sleep. This I soon discovered to be an absolute impossibility. The jolting of the carriage and the rolling of wheels took up all manner of senseless and irritating refrains, and sang them over and over again until I was sick and angry. One in particular, the chorus of a song supposed by the general populace to be comic, and in reality not more or less idiotic than a hundred others of its kind which I have known

before and since, insisted on returning with such a perseverance as no cheering, enlightening thought, or any fancy anyhow reasonable and human, has displayed since the world began—'Slap, bang! here we are again.' I tried to remember and to repeat verses, and before I had travelled through the first four lines of Poe's 'Raven,' Slap, bang! there we were again, there we were again, there we were again; slap, bang! there we were again; what jolly dogs were we. I got out my note-book, and tried to study its pages by the light of the sickly yellow lamp, but the oil washed to and fro in the dirty glass basin and made the very flame wink to that abominable tune and those unmeaning words. The wheels ground them out remorselessly, and the carriage creaked and rattled and complained all over. For we always were so jolly, oh! so jolly, oh! so jolly, oh! we always were so jolly, oh! what jolly dogs were we. I gave up trying to do anything, and travelled on to Exeter

in a dumb and anguished resignation to that brutal melody.

I hardly knew whether I was shocked or relieved to find Pole standing on the platform at two o'clock in the morning to receive me. He was ordinarily very cool about his demonstrations of friendship, but he shook me by the hand with what was, for him, an unwonted show of warmth, and clawed me affectionately by the shoulder. At our first encounter his face was in the light, and mine in the dark, and I could see a marked difference in him. He had grown quite handsome in this last three months, and a look of settled, strong serenity had taken the place of the stern air of self-control which had been used to characterise him. He had brought a fly with him from the hotel, and laying hold of my portmanteau he carried it out of the station, and set it down on the front seat of the vehicle. We mounted, and the man rumbled away.

'I am glad to see you, old chap,' said

Pole cheerily, clapping his hand upon my knee. 'I suppose you have been having fine times in Paris.'

It was evident that he suspected nothing unusual as yet. I could see that he supposed me to have run down to Exeter simply for the pleasure of spending an hour or two in his society.

'I was out when your telegram came,' he went on when I had answered his last question with some commonplace, 'but I got in an hour after it was delivered, and found that I just had time to catch the up-train. So, guessing that you wouldn't have a great deal of time to spare—your last letter told me that—I thought it best to run up at once, and catch you on arrival. When have you to get back again?'

'As soon as possible,' I told him. 'I exceeded my leave to come down here.'

'Then,' said he, 'if you're not too tired, we'll make a sober night of it, and have a good long satisfactory jaw. You can sleep

going up by train to-morrow. I've been on the point of making a dash over to look at you half a dozen times, but, what with the poor old fellow down at Worborough and a certain affair that holds me in London when I get a chance to go there, I've missed doing it.'

My arrival seemed to have put him in unusually high spirits. His voice was changed, and had a ring of jollity in it I had never heard before. It cut me to the heart to think of the message I had to deliver to him, and for the moment I recoiled before my own enterprise with a complete cowardice. My cowardice was so complete, indeed, that I did at one moment actually resolve not to deliver my tidings at all in person, but to go away and write them. This abject condition did not endure long, however, and by the time at which the hotel was reached I had recovered my courage.

'I have taken a sitting-room,' said Pole cheerily, 'and there's a bit of a cold spread

laid out there in case you're hungry. Carry the portmanteau to this gentleman's room, John, and then, so far as we are concerned, you can go to bed.'

He led the way upstairs to a cheerful apartment, where candles burned upon the table and the mantelpiece, and a small fire glowed upon the hearth.

'Would you like a wash first?' he demanded, laying both hands upon my shoulders. For the first time he saw my face clearly, and he looked at me with a sudden anxiety. 'Jack, old man, what's the matter with you? You're looking quite ill, and worn, and miserable. What is it? No ill luck, I hope.'

I could scarcely speak, and I do not know to this hour in what words I broke the news. I can see his ghastly face, of mingled incredulity and horror, clearly — as clearly as I saw it then.

'You're mad, Denham!' he said. 'I saw her grave. You were with me when

Goldsmith brought the certificate of her death.'

It was, I told him, a most wicked and abominable plot. What means had been employed I could only guess at, but the object of the cheat was clear. His wife had effaced herself for the time to trap him into marrying again, and then to make his life a burden, as she had promised in my hearing. Goldsmith had entered into the scheme, as I surmised, partly from hatred, and partly in the hope of levying black-mail. I set the narrative of my discovery before him clearly, and told him of MacIlray's memory of Goldsmith's visit.

'There is but one thing,' I said, 'which seems to go against her identity. She speaks French as only a Frenchwoman might be supposed to speak it.'

'She spoke nothing else,' he answered, 'until she was twelve years of age. She was born in Paris.'

When the first shock of my intelligence

was over, he had taken one of his old lounging poses in a corner of the apartment, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets and one foot thrown across the other. He listened with bent head to all I had to say, and when I ceased to speak looked up at me.

'Well,' he said, with an odd laugh, 'I suppose it's true. It's like my luck. You'd better have a glass of wine, Denham. You're a bit knocked up, old man.'

He lounged over to the table on which the supper was laid out, with its white napkins and glittering electroplate, and there uncorked a bottle. He filled two wine-glasses, and held one out towards me. My shaking hand spilt half its contents on the carpet, but he drained his own, and, sitting down, drew a cigar-case from his pocket, and, having lit a cigar, sat smoking with apparent tranquillity, inspecting the ash of the tobacco and the texture of the cigar as if his judgment on its quality were a matter of some

importance. Recalling once more my own youthful experience at the time of my mother's illness and its renewal of that very night, I knew so well what that seeming indifference covered, that it looked heart-breaking to me.

'For Heaven's sake, Pole,' I besought him, 'don't take it that way.'

I think I was half beside myself with pity, and a foolish, unavailing remorse that it was I who had struck this blow.

'My dear boy,' he said, 'it's got to be taken. I must take it how I can.'

I sat watching him in an unhappy silence whilst he smoked, and seemed to take no note of anything. When the cigar had dwindled to a mere stump he threw it into the fireplace, and sauntered up and down the room, pausing here and there to inspect the prints upon the wall. Twice he laughed to himself, with a mockery which was dreadful to hear, a bitter, mirthless chuckle of half a dozen notes.

'Suppose,' he said at last, 'that I don't believe this story, Denham? There's more than one Jew named Goldsmith in the world.'

'You can't act,' I answered, 'as if you didn't believe it.'

'No, no, no,' he said, as if he were repelling some uninteresting and commonplace stupidity. 'I can't act as if I didn't believe it. But all the same, I won't believe it till I know. You're going back to Paris?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I must get back as soon as possible. I should have been on my way now if I had not been obliged to see you.'

'Well,' he answered calmly, 'it couldn't have been a very pleasant task for you, and I'm very much obliged to you. I'll go to Paris with you, and we'll look into things. There's an up express at eight. We'll take it together.'

I had not formed any conception of the manner in which he would receive the news. I could hardly have conceived him as accept-

ing anything unless with self-possession and like a man, but the spectacle of his extreme quietude was harder to endure than any outbreak from a man of softer fibre would have been. We sat the remnant of the night through, keeping silence for the most part, though sometimes Pole would open an indifferent theme, and talk upon it for a moment or two. When sounds about the house assured us that the servants were astir, he rang the bell. The candles had burned down in their sockets, and the morning light already stole in grayly upon our haggard faces, on the unmoved dish-covers and the gray ashes of the extinguished fire. The waiter, who appeared in morning *négligé*, stared at us in a faint wonder. Pole wrote out a telegram, gave the waiter instructions to remove the untasted meal, and ordered breakfast. His message was addressed to Lord Worborough, and stated simply that I had brought news of prime importance which took him away for a day or two. We filled

up the time of waiting for breakfast in our separate bedrooms. I was not conscious of any wish to sleep, but a cold bath removed a good deal of the fatigue which naturally lay upon me, and dissipated for the time a heavy headache, which had felt to me like a part of Pole's unhappiness.

Neither of us ate much when the breakfast came, and the time drawled on wearily, the very ticking of the clock seeming to have slowed down on purpose to retard our departure. The express sauntered idly Londonwards — nothing could have seemed quick enough to my unreasoning impatience. There was no delivery beyond, no relief nor hope to hasten to. Yet if I had had wings as swift as meditation I could not have gone faster than I desired.

Pole, who had supplied himself with necessities for the night only, went to his own chambers, and there packed a portmanteau. He was fond of having everything which appertained to his own personal require-

ments, fine and rich, and he got together all his pretty trifles with a mechanical precision. We dined at a restaurant, and took the evening train. In my own case nature asserted herself after all the fatigue I had undergone, and I slept uneasily most of the way to Dover, and again after the passage of the Channel. Whenever my slumbers broke I opened my eyes to see Pole sitting opposite to me grave and impassive. The old, hard look was back upon his face, and was intensified tenfold. He looked as if he were going to lead a forlorn hope, or to be hanged, and was determined to take the inevitable without a sign. He was in all my waking thoughts, and in all my dreams. I fell over scores of yawning precipices on that mournful journey, but never once without Pole having fallen over the edge before me, or his falling with me, or his cry, as he followed, startling me to a waking knowledge scarcely more endurable than my dreams.

Reaching Paris, we repaired at once to the

Boulevard Haussmann, and there, leaving our portmanteaux in the fiacre at the door, we mounted to MacIlray's room. I had told Pole of my message to him, and my fear lest Mrs. Pole should have vanished in the certainty that I had recognised her, and we had decided to visit MacIlray first of all. That good Scot was already up and half attired, pottering about his room in dressing-gown and slippers. He recognised Pole at once from a portrait of him he had seen in my possession, and said as much with an amiable cordiality.

'You got the message I sent to you by wire?' I asked.

'Ay,' he said, 'I got it; but I got it an hour too late. The birdie's flown, lad.'

I glanced at Pole and saw, by his face, that he accepted this as strong confirmation of my story, though I knew well enough that at the bottom of his mind the story had no need of confirmation. He drew a leathern portfolio of rather unusual size from his

pocket, and from this produced two or three photographs. The photographer's art had not reached to anything like its present excellence of delicacy, but the likeness in these sun-pictures, though a little hard, was unmistakable.

'Two identifications,' said Pole quietly, 'are stronger than one. Is that the lady Mr. Denham believed himself to recognise?'

'The verra woman,' MacIlray declared, when he had found and polished his gold-rimmed spectacles. 'There's no mistake in the world about that. The likeness would just hang her. I suppose,' he added, with a manner which robbed his speech of its apparent brusquerie, 'I suppose, sir, ye'll be the unhappy husband. Denham named no names, but ye're always on his tongue, and he said she was the wife of his dearest friend, so that I was inclined to suppose 'twas you.' There he fell into a little reverie over the photographs as they lay upon the table. He rubbed his red hair fretfully until it stood up everywhere, and came to his unvarying

conclusion, 'Ay, ay, Denham! Ay, ay, man! Ay, ay!' It was spoken with a tone of profound melancholy, but he brightened into eagerness a moment later. 'I hope,' he said, 'that I've done the right thing. These police in Paris are just demons, and if once they get hold of a thing they'll worry you to death about it. I evitated them, and went to a first-rate *maison de confiance* within an hour and a half of the lady having left the house; and I've one other bit of news for you. I found this—' he rummaged in his coat-pockets, and by and by produced a telegram, dated from London, addressed to Madame Damal, and bearing these words only, '*Partez sans délai pour Lyons.*' 'She dropped that upon the table,' he said, 'and left it behind her.'

'That,' said Pole, taking it up and letting it flutter back to the table, 'is nothing but a blind. If she leaves word in that way that she has gone to Lyons, Lyons is the one place in the world she will not go to.'

CHAPTER XXII

We found, upon inquiry, that the private agent employed by MacIlray had already been at work to some effect. Knowing the precise hour at which Mrs. Pole had left the house, and having a fairly accurate description of her personal appearance and attire from MacIlray, he had had little difficulty in finding the driver who had transported her and her luggage to the Gare de Lyons. The driver remembered the lady perfectly well for one or two reasons. In the first place, she was strikingly dressed in a mephistophelian mixture of black and scarlet; in the second place, the *cocher* seemed to have an eye for a handsome woman, and described his fare as 'fièrement belle'; finally, her

curious proceedings at the station had excited his wonder. At the moment of his arrival there a train had just discharged its passengers, and the man had lingered in the hope of picking up a new fare. He saw the lady whose luggage he had just assisted in dismounting from his own vehicle in the act of chartering another fiacre. He saw the luggage placed upon the roof, and heard the lady's order to be driven to the Gare de l'Est.

The agent, being supplied with the photographs, sought the driver a second time, and Pole and I accompanied him. The man recognised the face at once. That was undoubtedly the lady he had driven. Pole, who looked less interested either than the driver or myself, less interested even than the agent, held out one of the photographs for the coachman's observation, and bade him look at it attentively. Was it not possible, he asked, just possible, that he had been misled by a strong likeness? The man shook his head.

'If I were to tell you,' said Pole, 'that this lady is dead and buried, what should you say?'

'Nothing at all,' the coachman answered; 'I do not permit myself to say impolite things.'

'You would not believe it?'

'Assuredly I should not believe it.'

Pole feed the man for the trouble he had given him, and then, having surrendered the portrait to the agent for his assistance, he went away to the hotel he had chosen for himself, and left me to the pursuit of my ordinary avocations. I am free to confess that MacIlray and I consumed a good deal of the office time that day and for some days afterwards in the discussion of this surprising topic.

'He's a cool hand, yon,' said MacIlray, referring to Pole. 'I was at a loss with the man to begin with. He's one of those people that would like you to think they've a cannon-ball in their bosoms instead of a

heart, but it's my openion that he's a trifle more feeling than he'd have ye thenk him. There's a kyind o' man that has just a savage idea of pairsonal degnity, and that lives in a house with every window close-shuttered. I'm not sure that there isn't the wildest sort o' high-jenks going on within doors, for all so quiet as the house may look on the outside.'

I told him that this was very much my own opinion, and indeed that I knew Pole to be a man of very profound and sensitive feeling.

'The lady has the pull of him there very distinctly,' said the Scot. 'Not that she hasn't her feelings too, but she makes a luxury of them. A real flaming quarrel to a pairson of that desposition is nothing less than a Heaven-sent blessing. I wish the poor young gentleman well through with the business. It's a mighty petty to see a fine straight-grown young fellow like yon in such a strait.'

MacIlray took the story, so far as he was allowed to know it, very much to heart, and his contemplative 'Ay, ay, Denham,' grew much more frequent than of old, and took a mournful and almost despondent tone.

Pole had given me no invitation to join him, and I took it for granted that he would have preferred to be alone. I did my best to keep away from him, and for one whole day succeeded. At the end of that time I could wait no longer for a message from him, and I went to see him. He had taken apartments high up in a big hotel of the newer fashion, and when I entered his room he was seated, pen in hand, at a table by the window. He glanced at me across his shoulder, and bade me wait a minute or two whilst he finished his letter. I sat down at the opposite side of the table and could see his face clearly. It was stern and composedly set, but, unless I was much mistaken, there were signs in it of a recent surrender to his troubles. A handkerchief lay upon the table

near his hand. It was much crumpled and very moist, and I drew my own conclusions from the evidence which it and his eyes afforded.

I heard the rapid scrawl of his signature following on the more deliberately written text, and he looked up at me.

'That's over,' he said, laying a sheet of blotting-paper upon the letter, and smoothing it with a resolute and heavy hand.

I did not answer him in words, and when he had folded the letter and enveloped and addressed it, he tossed it across the table to where I sat. I saw that it was addressed to Delamere, and I could guess at once the nature of its contents, and the emotions Pole had endured in writing it.

Neither of us said anything of this, however, and each was certain that the other understood.

'The agent was here,' said Pole, 'a couple of hours ago. He came to tell me that he had been to the Gare de l'Est with the

photograph, and had made inquiries there. He found a booking clerk who remembered to have given her a ticket, but unfortunately he was not able to recall the place for which she started. The man proposes now to take the line, station by station, to show the photograph everywhere, and make inquiries until he lights upon her.'

'Is there,' I asked him, 'any lingering doubt in your mind which makes you pursue this chase?'

'I don't know,' he answered, with an air of great weariness, 'that I should care to call it a doubt. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose I have any doubt about the matter. But there's a sort of fantastic fancy that I may be chasing a phantom. It is just strong enough to keep me going till I find her. It is not strong enough to keep me here, for I am going back to-night. I was coming round to your place to say good-bye before starting.'

'Are you going back to Worborough?'

I asked, chiefly for the sake of saying something.

'I am going back to London first,' he answered in a tone of weary boredom. Then he straightened himself, and added, in a changed voice, 'I am going to see Mr. Goldsmith.'

What there was in the tone, or what I saw in his face to inspire me with so incredible and so wild a fancy as shot into my mind at that moment, I should find it difficult, if not impossible, to tell. If that mad imagination did him wrong, as I do now most sincerely believe it did, it has at least long since been confessed and forgiven.

'For what purpose?' I asked him, speaking as calmly as I could, though I knew that my voice trembled.

He did not answer me, but took two or three paces up and down the room.

'Pole,' I said, laying a hand upon his arm. He turned and looked at me. 'If,' I continued, 'if you go to see that man,

I go with you. You shall not visit him alone.'

'Very well,' he said. 'You can come if you please. I supposed you had your work to see to.'

'I can arrange for that,' I answered. 'There are more important things than that in the world; and you shan't see Goldsmith alone just now, if I can help it.'

'Very well,' he answered me again; 'you shall have your own way.'

He looked at me with a strange smile, more mournful and more tender than any human expression I can remember to have seen.

'What is the good,' I asked him, 'of going to Goldsmith at all? What purpose do you propose to serve? If he is in the cheat at all—and we are as certain that he is as we can be of anything—you will only put your wife upon her guard, and make your discovery of her more difficult. Look the whole thing in the face: What is her

motive for running away from Paris? Fear of you?'

'No,' said Pole, 'she is not afraid of me, nor of anything.'

'She has been seen once,' I continued, 'and has gone away in the hope that by her complete disappearance she might delude you into the belief that I had been mistaken. I can trace the workings of her mind as clearly as if they were the action of my own. She argues that the wish is father to the thought. She knows you had the solidest grounds for believing her dead, and she thinks that in a while, with the passage of time, you will bring yourself to believe my certainty a mere suspicion, and so will fall into the hideous trap she set for you.

'Does it matter what she thinks?' he asked.

'Yes,' I answered; 'it obviously matters much. If she knows that you are absolutely certain of her existence she knows that she has no purpose to serve further, and if you

desire to find her for the satisfaction of that lingering doubt you spoke of you will do it far more easily by not giving her warning than by giving it.'

'I mean to see Goldsmith, all the same,' Pole answered.

'In that case,' I told him, 'I shall go at once to MacIlray and make arrangements for another day or two of absence.'

'That's agreed upon,' said Pole. 'I would as soon have you for a looker-on as anybody.'

It was agreed that I should call upon him in time to catch the northward express, and so, for a time, we parted. I found MacIlray at the office and told him of my purpose.

'Ye're a verra reasonable youth,' said he, when I had made my statement, 'and I'll suppose that ye have a reason for this. But there's two three things to be looked after, and I'm thenking they'll be getting a little wild in London. They seem to have less appreciation of my leterary style than I honestly think I desairve, and they'll be

missing that compact hand o' yours. Ye'd best give the chief a look-up in town and offer an explanation.'

I promised to take that duty upon myself, and was making ready to go away when he crossed the room with an air of mystery and understanding.

'I've been taking,' said he, 'a sempathetic look round, and for the space o' some ten seconds I've been mentally occupying your friend's position. I'm of openion that ef I were in his place, I'd be sorely tempted nine-tenths to slay that blagyard lettle Jew creature. Keep an eye on your friend, Denham. He's a bit of a volcano. He's tall enough to wear ice on the top of him, but that's no argument against the existence of the fire below.'

I told MacIlray that it was precisely this reflection and no other which had persuaded me to accompany Pole to London. Hearing this, he shook me warmly by the hand.

'There's a heap o' wesdom abroad,' he

said, 'but there's a wonderful small amount of it finds its way into the British jury-box. It's honest human nature to give a fellow like that sore bones, but it might go unduly hard with the man that ded it. Ye're on an honest errand, and ye're a decent lad, Denham, and I'll just do my best in your absence.'

There is nothing to tell of the return journey to London, except that Pole's manner throughout it kept that mad inquietude of which I have spoken alive and active. We went straight to his own chambers, and there refreshed ourselves, and at about eleven o'clock Pole began to draw on his gloves, and announced his intention of starting forthwith to visit Mr. Goldsmith.

On one of the walls of his bedroom a series of brass-headed nails had been driven in to form a rack for a considerable collection of walking-sticks, hunting-crops, and riding-whips. Pole, lounging up to this with the thumbs of his gloved hands stuck into his pockets, surveyed the collection with a critical

eye. By and by he selected, and laid upon the sitting-room table, a whip with a handle of twisted whalebone and a loaded head of silver. As he stood passing a brush about his hat I took hold of this weapon and balanced it in my hand. Pole looked at me with a face of no expression, and without saying anything to him I took back the whip and put it in its original place. Pole, setting his hat nonchalantly on the back of his head, sauntered after me and took it down again. Looking me full in the face with that same marked absence of any legible expression, he lowered it firmly and slowly towards the table and finally deposited it there with a bang. I laid hands upon it once more.

'There's no knowing,' I said, balancing it anew, 'what damage this thing might do in the hands of a strong and angry man.'

A second time I placed it on the rack, and for the third time he took it down.

'Now,' he said, 'if you are ready we will go and see Goldsmith.'

CHAPTER XXIII

As everybody knows, it is easily possible to be mightily fond of a man, and yet to be angry with him. I was angrier with Pole than I had ever been in my life with anybody, and I walked by his side in hot indignation at his obstinacy. If he could have employed the whip he carried for Mr. Goldsmith's benefit without danger to himself, it is quite likely I might have felt differently about the matter. A mere flogging would have been slight punishment for Goldsmith's rascally offence, and I could even have taken some righteous pleasure in knowing that it was to be administered. It was quite natural that Pole should wish to administer it; but it was no part of my business to stand by and

allow him to get into new trouble. Even if he failed to regret the flogging itself, he was certain to regret its consequences. Perhaps at the bottom of my heart I was as anxious that Goldsmith should suffer as Pole himself was, and the very knowledge that he could not get his deserts without bringing more suffering to the man he had tried so vilely to injure, helped to increase my anger.

We marched side by side down Holborn towards Goldsmith's offices in Ely Place, without a word on either side. An outer door was open, and a dapper little City man was in the act of exchanging a final word with a clerk, and half blocked up the doorway. Pole, who had got a yard ahead of me, set this personage on one side without apology and walked past him, I following. There were two other people in the room, and one of them with a pen behind his ear made a step or two forward as we entered. Pole, without paying any heed to him, went straight to a door marked 'Private,' turned

the handle, and entered the farther room. I still kept at his heels, and was in time to see the start of amazement with which Goldsmith half arose from the chair he sat in. I had no sooner entered than Pole slammed to the door, turned the key, withdrew it, and put it in his pocket. I took advantage of the time afforded me by this movement to place myself between the two.

Goldsmith went very white, and those jetty little eyes of his glanced hither and thither in a rapid, unavailing search for a way of retreat.

'What do you mead by this?' he demanded. 'That's a very curious way of entering a business office, Bister Pole.'

'Yes,' said Pole; 'it's a curious way of entering a business office, Mr. Goldsmith. But it's a curious sort of creature that keeps the office, and I have a curious little bit of business to transact with him.'

There was a tone of relishing badinage in Pole's voice, but there was no suspicion of

humour in his look; and what with the bantering tone and the sternness of the gaze he encountered, Mr. Goldsmith saw such excellent reasons for fear that he turned paler still, and his hands began to tremble visibly.

'I don't understand you,' he responded nervously.

'I think you partly understand me,' Pole answered in the same mocking voice. 'I think we shall understand each other very thoroughly before long.'

The offered prospect of a perfect understanding was evidently unpleasant to Goldsmith. He must have known perfectly well that there was no way of retreat for him, but the jetty little eyes went on seeking for one all the same. He made a great effort to pull himself together, and partially succeeded.

'Have the goodness to explaid yourself,' he said.

There was a big ruler lying on the desk, and his hand reached out furtively towards it. Before I had a chance to move Pole

made a swift step forward and possessed himself of Goldsmith's defensive weapon. I was afraid that the promised understanding was coming about precipitately, but Pole merely dropped the ruler into a waste-paper basket out of Goldsmith's reach, and then seated himself.

'When my friend, Mr. Denham, here,' Pole began, 'had the distinguished honour of crossing the Channel in your company, you told him, as I learn, that you were on your way to see a client in Paris.'

Goldsmith must have known pretty well already what was coming, and he was pale enough in all conscience already. But at this opening of the case against him, such colour as his face still had deserted it, and his moist and pulpy lips took a bluish tinge.

'You described that client as a lady. You said that she would one day occupy a high position, and make a noise in the world. I suppose that you are already aware that

Mr. Denham met that client of yours four days ago?'

'How should I know that?' asked Goldsmith. 'And if I did know it, what is there id that to make a row about?'

The manner of his inquiry was utterly unsuccessful, and it was evident that he knew as much.

'Now,' Pole continued, 'since you visited your client personally, it is only reasonable to presume that you were aware of her identity.'

'What are you trying to talk about?' cried Goldsmith, with a wretched attempt to look surprised and puzzled. 'Of course I've been aware of her idedtity. I got a letter from her odly yesterday. I don't know what business it is of yours, or what you come here and talk about her for.'

As often happens, the sound of the little scoundrel's voice seemed to lend him courage, and I fancy he saw a glimmer of hope that the lines of his defence might shield him

after all if he were only allowed to get behind them. His shaking hands made a search amongst a little heap of documents, pigeon-holed in one of the compartments of the knee-table at which he sat. He produced one of the papers with a frightened, blustering flourish, and slapped it on the table as if he would have said that that alone would clear him of any possible aspersion.

'There's the letter,' he said; 'it's got nothing to do with you so far as I know, but you cad look at it if you like.'

Pole extended his hand as if asking for the document, and I, standing between him and the table, passed it to him, and slightly changing my posture, was able to read it with him. It ran thus:—

'LYONS, 64 RUE DE LA RÉGENCE.

'DEAR SIR—During few days my adresse will be as here above. I myself have found forced to quit Paris, and am myself here established. Behold me absent of my documents of affairs, and it must that you wait

my return for a fifteen of days. Agree, dear sir, my salutations regretful for the pain I give you, MARIE DAMAL.'

'That's the kind of stuff she writes,' cried Goldsmith, as Pole handed the letter back to me. 'She picks the words out of the dictionary.'

'This document, Mr. Goldsmith,' said Pole, 'is of no interest to me. It is not in my wife's handwriting.'

At this Goldsmith gave a great start, and tried hard to feign amazement.

'I say, Bister Dedhab,' he said, appealing to me, 'if he's like that you ought to have him taken care of. It isn't very likely to look like your wife's handwriting. It's quite enough that there should have been such a surprising personal likeness between them. D'ye think it's that'—he appealed to me again—'that's turned him queer? Has he seen the lady?'

'I myself,' I answered, impatient alike

of Pole's savage banter and Goldsmith's shuffling, 'I myself saw Mrs. Pole alive on Monday last in Paris, and dined at the same table with her.'

'Well, upod my word,' cried Mr. Goldsmith, with a very creditable assumption of amazement this time, though his success was achieved too late to be of much service to him; 'the pair of you are mad together. There's a likedess, I admit that there's a likedess, but it ain't so strong as that comes to, not by long chalks.'

'Very well, Mr. Goldsmith,' said Pole, 'I will tell you what you shall do. You shall put yourself in my charge from this moment, you shall conduct me into the presence of this client of yours, and you shall be so watched that you shall have no opportunity of warning her of our arrival. If your statement is true I will pay you your own claim for wasted time, and for expenses.'

This proposal made Goldsmith more un-

comfortable than ever, but he affected to treat it as a mere piece of madness.

'I'm not going gallivanting off to France on a fool's errad with a couple of madmen,' he declared. 'I've got my business to see to, and I'm going to see to it.'

'My good Goldsmith,' said Pole, with a cruel suavity, 'I will give you my cheque for five hundred pounds at this moment. It will be honoured on your return.'

'What a piece of nodsense!' cried Goldsmith. 'What do I want to rob you of five hundred pounds for? There's the lady's address, 64 Roo de la Regedce, Lyods. Go and make a call on her.'

'You won't earn five hundred pounds so easily?' asked Pole.

'No!' shouted Goldsmith. 'I won't be bothered any more with such a pack of foolery. Go and see the lady. Go and see her.'

'Will you earn five hundred pounds,' Pole asked, 'by a ten-minutes' drive in a cab?'

He drew from his pocket a copy of the photographic portrait he had left with the agent in Paris, and held it up before Goldsmith.

'No, I won't,' snarled Goldsmith, without waiting to hear what might be proposed to him. 'I won't have anything to do with you.'

'I think it possible,' Pole said, in the same unrelenting quiet voice, 'that we may have much to do with each other by and by. I offer you five hundred pounds if you will drive with me to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and declare that this is a portrait of the dying woman whom you identified there as Adelaide Pole. Will you earn the money?'

Goldsmith returned no answer this time, but his breath grew thick and husky, and his glance darted hither and thither in a panic-stricken renewal of his search for a way of escape. There were curious, dry-looking little flecks of foam upon his lips,

and his hands no longer merely trembled. They shook like those of a man with the palsy. Pole returned the photograph to his pocket, and rose to his feet, buttoning his coat as he did so. He held the whip tightly clenched in his right hand meanwhile, and the little Jew cowered in his seat before him. I put myself between the two, and looked Pole in the face.

'This man,' I said, 'has done you too great a wrong to be paid for in this way. You shall not put yourself in the wrong if I can help it.'

'Let me get by, Jack,' he said in a tone of quiet commonplace.

'If you will have a little reason,' I answered him, 'you will know what must come of this. If you lay violent hands upon this pitiful little rascal here, you disgrace yourself publicly. You can't keep out of the exposure some names that are sacred to you.'

'Let me get by,' he said.

'I will not let you get by,' I answered. 'I am too much your friend.'

'You don't want to quarrel with me, Denham?'

'Not I; but you shall only do this mad and useless thing by making me unable to prevent it.'

During this contention Goldsmith had risen and stolen to the waste-paper basket, where he secured the big ruler. Then he entrenched himself behind an arm-chair in a corner, and stood to watch the progress of events with a natural and excusable anxiety.

'Wait a moment,' Pole said, with an odd gleam at me, half-humorous, half-mournful, and altogether affectionate. 'Perhaps you and I may arrive at a compromise, old fellow. I don't want to make this visit altogether profitless, and I have a proposal to make. I am going to ask Mr. Goldsmith my wife's real whereabouts. If he will give me that I will let him off so far as this goes, and if he

will not, I shall ask your indulgence whilst I flog him till he does.'

I think there is nothing so tragic in this world that it can altogether exclude the element of humour. The whole of this business was tragic and bitter enough, but if I had had to change places with Goldsmith for it, I could not have saved myself from laughter at the sight of his countenance when I acceded to Pole's proposal.

'Yes,' I said, 'I consent to that, because I know he is not the sort of man to take a thrashing for anybody's sake.'

The little man in the corner had obviously experienced a beautiful relief at my interposition. But now he fell into a state of terror altogether abject.

'I shall take it fightig,' he quavered from behind his arm-chair, and made a paralytic show with the big ruler. 'I ain't goig to be knocked about and not retaliate. You can't expect that, Bister Pole, now can you? I put it to you. You can't expect me not to retaliate.'

'You pledge yourself, Denham,' said Pole, 'not to interfere between this fellow and myself if he refuses me an answer.'

'Certainly,' I replied; 'if he refuses the answer I leave him in your hands.'

At this response Goldsmith gave an exasperated little whine, and snatched the arm-chair closer.

'Now, Mr. Goldsmith,' said Pole, sternly advancing upon him, 'you know what I want. Will you give it to me peacefully, or shall I be compelled to thrash it out of you?'

'How should I know what you want?' Goldsmith asked, watching Pole's riding-whip with comfortlessly expectant eye.

'I want you to give me my wife's address.'

'Her address,' said the wretched Hebrew, 'is at Kedsal Greed.'

'Come from behind that chair,' said Pole, with a sudden sternness. 'Take a seat at your table. Take this pen. Write the address upon that envelope. I give you sixty

seconds. If it is not done by that time you shall take the consequences.'

He drew out his watch, and looked at it fixedly, his right hand swishing the riding-whip up and down with a threatening and disturbing sound.

'Fifteen seconds,' he said, after what had seemed a much longer pause. Then, after a pause, which seemed even longer, 'Thirty seconds.' Goldsmith dipped the pen, and groaned. 'Forty seconds,' said Pole. Goldsmith groaned again, and the pen began to travel rapidly.

The address was written, and Pole, taking it from the table, read, 'Madame Damal, 28 Rue Racine, Quartier de l'Odéon, Paris.' He pressed it on the blotting-pad which lay upon the table, and placed it in his pocket-book.

'And now,' he said, 'you know better than I to what penalties you have made yourself liable by joining in this conspiracy. Your safest way will be to put me in possession of the whole plot and its purpose.'

Goldsmith seemed to realise this, and in a while he began a confused and intricate narrative, which, being unravelled and plainly told, amounted to this: On a certain day, between four and five months earlier, Mrs. Pole had witnessed a street accident. She had followed the woman who was injured to the hospital, and had there professed to identify her as Adelaide Pole. She had given a false name and address, and had come at once to Goldsmith to inform him of the move she had made, and to tell him its purpose. The woman was, beyond doubt, fatally injured, and the hospital surgeons gave no hope of her recovery. Mrs. Pole induced Goldsmith to assist in the pretended identification, and it was he who had found money for the funeral expenses. He had, since that time, supported his fellow-conspirator, in the belief that Pole would re-marry, and that they would then be able to black-mail him to almost any extent. Mrs. Pole's object was mainly to be revenged upon her husband.

Goldsmith professed to have been more than half frightened into the transaction by her threats.

'She's got ad awful temper, Bister Pole,' he said. 'She's an extremely violedt person. You know she is. I wouldn't live with such a woman for the world. I can sympathise with you, sir, I can indeed.'

'I will not decide at present,' Pole answered, disregarding, not unnaturally, this novel sentiment of Mr. Goldsmith's. 'I may take criminal proceedings against both of you.'

'Oh,' cried Goldsmith, 'I hope that better coudsels may prevail with you.'

'If,' Pole pursued, 'you give one sign to my wife of my knowledge of her whereabouts, I shall enter on those proceedings at once. You understand that I make no promise of refraining from them in any case. I only warn you that any communication from you to my wife will precipitate matters.'

Goldsmith was so thoroughly cowed by this time that the warning seemed unnecessary.

'I've washed my hands of the whole business,' he exclaimed. 'I'll have no more to do with it. I'd never have put a finger to it if you hadn't chucked me idto the river. But look here now, Bister Pole. You look at it, Bister Dedhab. Suppose anybody chucked either one of you idto the river and you got a chance to land him one on a dark night three months after, and if you thought it was quite safe to do it, do you think you'd let the chance go by? I put it to you, gentlebed. I put it to you as hodourable and high-minded men.'

Pole unlocked the door, and we left this query unanswered.

When we came upon the street, with the clerks in Mr. Goldsmith's employ staring after us, as well they might, he passed his arm through mine, and gave a little friendly pressure.

'I'm very much obliged, Denham. You have saved me from a very grave folly.'

CHAPTER XXIV

The days and the weeks went by, and winter was back again. I heard but little of the people with whom this history concerns itself. I had bidden good-bye to Pole sorrowfully and reluctantly, and had returned to my duties in Paris, leaving him to go back to Worborough, to tend the last days of an old man who had been nearly all his life a stranger, and to abandon the dead and buried hopes which lay behind him in London. It is never a useful or an admirable thing to rave against the unescapable. The common-sense of the proverb is final, and the last word which is to be spoken on that question lies in its curt jingle—what can't be cured must be endured. Endured it has to be, after one

fashion or another, and Pole took his share of the inevitable, to my thinking, like a hero. It is a common cant of opinion, as often falsified as justified by fact, that the men and women who take misfortune or joy most calmly taste the bitterness of the one or the sweetness of the other with a fulness of suffering or pleasure unknown to the more expansive and explosive sort. I have always combated this judgment, perhaps because I am myself a rather expansive kind of person, but I know that in Pole's case it would have found as strong a confirmation as a general theory can gather from a single instance. He said nothing, and he felt the more. Words would have eased him if he could have brought himself to speak, but he was one of those who have to break before they can bend, and any revelation of his own feelings would have been too terrible. He wrote me now and again, simply and briefly, and his letters made no allusion to the past. They spoke of Lord Worborough's failing

health oftener than of anything. I never knew, as a matter of actual fact, but I was fairly certain that Pole had told him of the plot his wife had laid. I dare say the discomfort of this knowledge weighed considerably upon the old man's enfeebled spirits. These letters of Pole's, with their monotonous news of a monotonous life, were infinitely mournful to me, and Clara's communications by and by became, for various reasons, almost as disquieting. One lies before me now, the foreign letter paper discoloured at the folds and edges, and the ink gray with old age. I transcribe a part of it here, premising that it reached me within a day or two after my parting with Pole and my return to Paris.

'The whole household,' Clara wrote, 'has been so unhappy for the last few days that I really have been unable to find the heart to write to you. Mr. Delamere himself is miserable enough, but for him I can only have a very modified sort of pity. It is only natural to suppose that he feels a great deal

disappointed, but he has dealt in nothing but table eloquence all his life, and anything which brings him a new subject for it seems to be welcome, more or less. I am sick of variations on the Vanity of Human Wishes, played in the major key, played in the minor key, played with both hands, played with one hand tied up behind him. The man is exasperating beyond endurance, and he treats his daughter's nerves—I say nothing of mine, because they don't matter, and he has no great reason to consider them — as if they were an instrument constructed for no other earthly purpose than to show what tunes he can play upon them. I have broken out once about it to Mary, literally because I could not help it, and have pained her so much, poor thing, that I spent a whole night in crying, and am a horrid, red-eyed spectre at this moment, with a swollen nose. If he were anybody but Mary's father I should say something to him which would shake him out of his hateful self-complacency for a day or two.

'I suppose you know that Mr. Pole wrote a letter relating your strange discovery in Paris to Mr. Delamere. It came whilst we were at the breakfast-table, and all in the highest spirits. We had been out late the night before, and were late at breakfast, the letter coming by the second post. Mr. Delamere's reception of it was really and seriously tragic, and if he had not talked my sympathies to sleep since then, and talked every nerve of our minds into absolute rawness, I should have still been sorry for him. As it is, I should have left the house but for Mary. The thing that weighs upon her mind most of all is the silly fancy that it is sinful in her to think of Mr. Pole now that she knows that his wife is still alive, as if it were her fault that that wicked and abominable plot was made, or as if one could turn the whole current of one's thoughts in an hour. She does not say much, even to me, but she suffers dreadfully. She has quite lost the sense of taste, and I have read of that some-

where as being a sign of mental suffering, or at least as going with it very often, especially in girls. I don't know why girls especially should be made to suffer as they are, but they really do seem to get the worst of it.

'Mr. Pole had given her a number of beautiful presents, and one of the first things she did after the news was to pack them all up together to send back to him. Mr. Delamere dropped the letter on the table when he had read it, and blurted out the truth at once, though one of the servants was in the room. Mary went as white as a ghost, but she said nothing at all, and when she went up to her own room I had to help her. If she had cried or given way at all I should have liked it better, but she was so stony about it that she really frightened me. She began in a while to creep about the room and gather the presents into a little heap.

'I have had to stop writing, for it has made me cry to think about it. I have been

crying, off and on, for days past, and now anything sets me going. Then sometimes at the silliest thing in the world, I giggle until I cry again for very shame at my own cruelty and heartlessness. But I don't want to write about Me, and Me gets into everything, though I do try every hour to be more like Mary. She is a downright angel. She never thinks of herself, or talks of herself at all. All her thought and care is to save other people from sorrow and trouble, whilst, as for me—but there is Me again. I would tear up this sheet and begin a new one, only that would be a sort of hypocrisy. I shall leave it so that you may see what I really am. I don't want to *seem* better than I am but I want, oh I *do* want, to *be* better.

'I wouldn't tell anybody else these things for the world, because they seem too sacred to be talked about. But she kissed the bracelets and the rings and the little watch he gave her—she kissed everything as she

put it down on the dressing-table, and every time she gave a pitiful little moan as if her heart were breaking. And all the while she never shed one tear. It was really awful to look at her, and I had not the courage to speak a word. I don't believe she knew that I was there.

'You won't think me flippant or unfeeling for writing these things to *you*, darling. They seem to be the measure of something I feel inside myself, and that, I think, is the real reason why I write them.'

I know that at the time I read a great deal into this simple narrative which no other reader could have found there, and I know that, after this lapse of years, I still read into it the knowledge of the generous, tender, loyal little creature who penned the lines. I am not in the least ashamed to own that I cried in reading the lines my sweetheart had cried over in writing. As for poor old Pole, my heart used pretty constantly to ache about

him in those days. I have given up forming lofty estimates of new acquaintances on insufficient provocation, but I am glad to have had a friend in youth whom I could scarcely find a flaw in. It is a good thing for a lad to have a human idol if he choose a strong and honest nature for his worship, and though I am writing of myself I have no fear in proclaiming that this same youthful faculty for hero-worship is as good and gracious a sign in a young fellow as any I know how to look for.

Things went on in a dull and uneventful way for some months, until, as I have said already, the winter was round upon us in its course once more. I got then another letter from Clara, which brought strange news indeed. It was in searching for this that I lighted upon the one I have just transcribed. The first sentence of this new letter struck me like a blow. The very place from which it was dated had an unfamiliar look to me.

'GRANTLEY HOLME, CHESHIRE.

'MY DEAR JOHN,—The Delamere household has broken up, after the strangest and most unexpected scenes, and mamma has taken me to the house of my uncle, Major Grantley. You have often heard me speak of him. For quite a month it was evident that there was something in the air. I was unable to guess its meaning, but I saw it and felt it constantly. First of all there was some trouble between Mr. Delamere and Mary. She had resolved to join a sisterhood belonging to the Church of St. Mildred. She often spoke to me about it, and I thought it on many grounds a very excellent idea. It is one of those common-sense, good sisterhoods where the sisters devote themselves simply to nursing the sick poor, and generally helping the poor to be good and happy. She spoke about her wish to Mr. Delamere, but he made such eyebrows over it, and became so very wordy about the Degradation of the Social Ideal by Contact

with Common Things, that she relinquished her own ideal at once, as she always did if that grand Sultan did not immediately and entirely approve of it. I am sure the work would have done her good, and would have given her an object in life. I believe the great Turk's main objection was to the costume, though I am sure that Mary would look perfection in it, and the white, though it would be a shame to hide such beautiful hair as hers, would put a little colour into her pale complexion, by contrast. To hear Mr. Delamere talk about art and costume, you would think that at least he would have been able to understand that. I am *not* trivial, as you think I am. I am only showing you what a hollow mockery Mr. Delamere is, even where he is supposed to know something.

'Mary gave up the idea, and instead of going out and getting new interests in life, and gladdening the hearts of the poor, and doing good to hundreds with her sweet ways,

she had to stop and mope at home under the ceaseless cataract of æsthetic and philosophical chatter from the Turk. Oh, I am glad to be away from it, and to know that Mary is away from it.

'But I have something more serious than all this to write about. The servants grew actually impertinent, and once when Mr. Delamere ordered the cook upstairs to complain of something in his majestic way, the woman jeered at him, quite openly. I expected the dining-room floor to open and let her down into the basement, but it did nothing of the kind. Mr. Delamere at once gave her a month's notice, and the cook said, "Give me my money for the last six months, and I'll go this instant minute."

'"You shall have a cheque at once," said Mr. Delamere, but the cook snapped her fingers at him, and put her hands upon her hips. I had no idea that she could be so impolite and vulgar, for I had always thought her a rather superior woman for her station.

'"You'd better send it to the bank and have it cashed first," she said. "I don't want a two-mile walk through the mud for nothink."

'Mr. Delamere ordered her from the room, and she went away, declaring that she would have her money or her money's worth before she left the house, even if she had to take it out of him. I suppose she meant to say that she would rob him.

'Mr. Jones was present at this dreadful exposure, and—would you believe it?—he has not once been near the house since then. I am very glad to learn from mamma that it was arranged between herself and Mr. Delamere all along that my maintenance should be paid for. She says that the arrangement was on a very liberal scale, and as mamma is not stingy in such matters, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I was a help rather than a burden to the household in that respect.

'Very soon after this I began to see a

dreadful man about the house, and I did not at all understand who he could be. I think he lived downstairs, but he was very often in the hall, looking strangely suspicious, as if he thought that I had something about me that did not belong to me. He called Mr. Delamere "Governor," and at first I thought he might be a humble member of the Moral Tone Association. Mamma, however, says that he must have been a bailiff—and a bailiff is an officer of the law, though I am sure he did not look like one. I always thought that his clothes looked as if they must have been drowned at one time in their history, his hat and boots particularly. The servants were more impertinent and inattentive than ever during this man's presence in the house, and Mr. Delamere was so depressed that he did not even lecture. Mary was unwell at the time the man came, and did not see him until the morning he went away.

'Mr. Delamere spent every hour of the

day, except from dinner-time onwards, out of the house, and spoke in the morning very hopefully of having business in the city. He came home at night much downcast, and sat a long while alone in the dining-room after dinner.

'When Mary recovered from her cold and came downstairs I was with her, and she saw the man in the hall. She asked him what he wanted, and the man seemed abashed, and scraped his feet on the oil-cloth. Mr. Delamere came out of the dining-room and told him that he had better go downstairs. Mary was frightened, and I am quite sure that she understood the meaning of the man's presence. Up to this time I did not. But when I saw her so alarmed it unhinged my own nerves a little. After breakfast, which passed off very silently and sadly, Mr. Delamere said that he wished to speak to Mary alone. I went into the library and stayed there, reading all the morning. Mr. Delamere went out, and

shortly afterwards the postman came. The parlour-maid came into the library without knocking, and threw a letter on to the table so unceremoniously that it skimmed right over the smooth leather and fell on the side I was sitting, at my feet. The girl bounced out and slammed the door behind her, making a sort of defiant inarticulate noise as she went. I should describe it as a snort. You can have no conception of the extreme discourtesy of all the servants at this time.

'Well, I picked up the letter, and in doing that it turned out that I was the innocent cause of all the unpleasantness which followed. I am quite certain now that if I had known what was going to happen I should have been justified in doing what I really did in ignorance, and I think that when you come to know everything you will applaud Mary's conduct as highly as I do. I saw at once that the letter came from Mr. Pole. Nobody who has ever seen that pike-and-sabre handwriting of his, with those

dogged-looking crosses to the t's, could ever mistake it for any one else's. It was addressed to Mr. Delamere from Worborough Court, for I saw the seal and the postmark. I went back to my reading and tried to think no more about it, though I wondered very much what it contained.

'When Mr. Delamere came home again only an hour later, he looked really wretched, and, in spite of my dislike, I could not help feeling sorry for him. I showed him the letter, and at the sight of it his face changed in a startling way. He was so agitated that he could scarcely open the envelope. He went to the window to read the letter and came back radiant. I never saw so great and rapid a change in a face. He ran out of the room and down the hall, and in a second or two I heard the hall-door open and close noisily behind him.

'Then came my real indiscretion. I am as glad of it as I should be if I had known everything. In fact I am a great deal more

glad, for I am almost certain that I should not have had the courage to do my duty. I ran upstairs to Mary, and I hugged and kissed her, and danced about her like a mad thing, until she insisted on knowing what had changed me so. Then I told her what had happened, and you may guess my surprise when she took it all gravely and solemnly, and seemed even to be made more sad and thoughtful by it. We had luncheon by ourselves, or rather we sat down to it, for I don't think anything was eaten, and, an hour later, Mr. Delamere came in, smiling all over, and as majestically condescending as ever. For quite a long time he had fallen from his old magnificent manner, and had been going about as if somebody had suddenly convinced him that he was an ordinary person. His clothes seemed to have changed. I can hardly describe to you the difference there was in him. He had not been in the house five minutes when the humble member of the Moral Tone Association went

away by the area steps. Mamma conjectures that he was dismissed, paid. Shortly afterwards Mr. Delamere held a conclave with the servants, who were all beautifully admonished, and also paid.

'While this was going on in the library Mary and I were in the dining-room. She was more agitated than I had ever seen her during the whole of her troubles, and once or twice she clutched me nervously, and I could feel that she was trembling all over. I did not understand what was going on in the next room until later, but Mary evidently understood it all. About five minutes after the servants had gone down she got up trembling, and went out of the room. I could hear her voice and Mr. Delamere's, and I could tell that he was angry. That mellow voice of his can grow very sharp and sour, it seems, and he soared into as high a treble as an angry woman's.

'I sat in the dining-room, and felt more and more uncomfortable whilst he scolded;

and I grew so angry at the tone he took, though I could not hear the words, that I was actually fighting against a temptation to go in between them, when Mary came into the dining-room, and her father followed her. His face was red with anger, and he was puffing from having talked so much and so rapidly. I think that of the two Mary was the more angry, and she looked at her father when he spoke with an expression which surprised me, it was so full of scorn. He went striding up and down the room, stopping every now and again in a jerky and undignified way to tell her that she was ungrateful, or that he stood amazed. You know his phrase; he always "stands amazed" when people differ from him in opinion. He has been standing amazed more or less ever since I have known him. But he was too angry to be smooth and lordly about it, as he generally is.

'At last he said, growing more and more angry because she would not answer him,

"And *you* pretend to feel humiliated? You? I accepted the humiliation for your sake. Do you suppose it has cost me nothing to subdue my pride and ask a favour at this man's hands?" Mary had taken up a newspaper which lay upon the table, and was making a pretence to read it, when Mr. Delamere actually snatched it from her hands. "Listen to me," he said; "I will not endure these airs of disrespect." Mary looked at him, and said quite quietly that there was nothing more to speak of between them, and that they did not understand each other. Then she left the room, and he positively made a dash at the door to stop her. But I stood between them, and he stood so very much amazed to see me assert myself in that way that he stopped stock still and allowed her to go.

'Of course I understood everything by this time. Mr. Delamere had been borrowing money from Mr. Pole. Can you imagine anything like it under the circumstances?

'And now I have told you everything except the close of the whole business, and that, I think, I told you at the beginning of my letter. Mary sent for me, and told me that she was compelled to leave home. She said nothing about the cause, and of course, knowing what I did, I could not venture to ask her any questions. She asked me to wire to mamma at once. I did so, and mamma came up to town next morning in a state of great astonishment, and took me away. She begged Mary to accompany us, but it was of no use to try to persuade her. She said she had plans of her own. What they are I do not know, but she has a little fortune of her own, which belonged to her mother, and brings her in not more than a hundred pounds a year, poor thing. I am certain that out of this she means to pay back to Mr. Pole the money her father borrowed from him. Then I think she will join the sisterhood, but that will be a very different affair for her now, especially if Mr. Pole's

loan was a large one, and she has to impoverish herself to pay it.

'I have told mamma what I am going to write down now. She says it is a most indelicate and unladylike proposition for a girl to make, and that I have no right to allude to such things. But if other people care to be so exquisite about their own delicacy, when they can do good by sacrificing a little of it, I *don't*. The proposition, my dear John, is this. You are to work your very best and hardest, and to get as soon as possible into a position to make a home of your own. Then I suppose you will marry a certain undeserving young person whom you profess to be very, very much attached to; that young person will have her own money, and be quite rich when she is married, and she and you will make the darlingest and best girl in the world come and live with us. That doesn't sound quite grammatical, but I think it says what I mean. The Grand Turk may think what he pleases, and may shower his

cataracts of drizzle on anybody he can find. Think of Mary Delamere, of all girls in the world, living on bread bought with borrowed money, and that money belonging to Mr. Pole!'

Then came certain lines which concern myself alone, and then, in a hastily-written postscript, followed this :—

'I was on the point of sending this to the post, when mamma came in with the news of poor old Lord Worborough's death. She had found it in *The Times*, where there was a short article about his career. We had all looked at the paper, and none of us had noticed it until then. So now Mr. Pole is Lord Worborough, and a millionaire, and the owner of I don't know how many thousands of acres. Poor young man! I am afraid that neither his title nor his millions will make him very happy.'

CHAPTER XXV

A DAY or two after the receipt of this intelligence came a black-edged letter from Pole, dated from Worborough Court, the envelope and letter-paper marked with a coronet. It simply repeated the news with which everybody had now grown familiar, and gave no hint of its writer's future intentions. There I am wrong. One clear hint it gave, in what I thought a very friendly and pleasing fashion. The brief epistle was signed 'Walter'; and I understood from this that, though Pole no longer had a use for his old familiar name, he was indisposed to fall upon me with the unfamiliar title, which must needs have stared at me rather forlornly from the paper. It is

rather hard to become suddenly rich and distinguished, and to retain one's poor and undistinguished friends. They are likely to be on the look-out for airs of coldness, and will be ready to read signs of hauteur everywhere. So the wealthy and ennobled has, if he wants to retain their friendship, to be a little warmer, a little more intimate and friendly, than of old.

After a lapse of two or three weeks my old friend came unexpectedly to Paris, and found me out there. I had changed my quarters, and had taken a pair of rooms in the Rue Neuve des Petits Champs, in which, at the house of dead-and-gone M. Terré, Thackeray ate his *bouillabaisse* and drank the famous Burgundy 'with yellow seal.' I took my coffee there of a morning, and dined upon the streets, as the cheerless, unhomelike, and most aptly descriptive phrase expresses it. Pole—I can find no other name for him, except for the back of an envelope or in conversation with others, unto this day—was

of course in mourning, and looked somehow statelier than of old, as if his responsibilities had laid a hand upon his shoulder. He was as far from taking airs as it is easily conceivable that a man should be, but his new position marked him, to my mind, though in a way not easily definable. His face brightened delightfully as I jumped up to meet him, and he shook hands with great cordiality. The animation of his manner did not last, however, and when we had settled down into talk I saw that his face was careworn, and so colourless as even to look unhealthy.

When we had chatted for half an hour or so he fell into a little quiet, and, as I guessed, was rather gravely turning over some speculation in his mind.

'I've been in Cheshire,' he said, looking up at me suddenly. 'There's some land there which the poor old man wanted to buy for sentimental reasons. I called at Grantley Holme. Do you know of such a place?'

I answered that I was aware of its existence, and he smiled. His smile had always been a pleasant thing to see, but now that his face had fallen to so settled an expression of melancholy, it was brighter than ever: a transient gleam of sunshine breaking through dark clouds.

'I had a talk,' he went on, 'with Mrs. Grantley, in the course of which your name was mentioned. She made a little pretence at first of regret for your engagement, but she soon threw that up, and began to show that she was quite proud of you. The book's a hit, Jack, and deserves to be. I saw a couple of columns in *The Times* about it, and I'm told there is to be an article in *The Quarterly*. But that's all apart from what I was going to say. I had a talk not only with the old lady, but with the young one; about that'—he threw a letter on the table. —'Read it.'

I took the letter, a business-looking document, and found that it was addressed to

Lord Worborough by a firm of London solicitors. They desired to know the amount in which Mr. Delamere stood indebted to his lordship, and stated that they were instructed to pay it without delay.

'I shouldn't show you this,' he went on, 'if I had not had that talk with Miss Grantley. She was in the house when Miss Delamere left it, and she confessed to me that she had told you the whole history.'

I found Clara's letter, and read it aloud to him, with certain omissions, and he listened calmly and attentively.

'Well now,' he said, 'since you know all this, I suppose you can guess pretty clearly at whose instigation that letter was written?'

I answered that it was evidently written at the instigation of Miss Delamere.

He tried to speak of her as he would have spoken of anybody who was indifferent to him, and was so far successful that a stranger would have noticed nothing.

'Yes,' he said, 'it was written at the instigation of Miss Delamere. I felt myself justified in making inquiries, and I have learned that she has three thousand in the three per cents. She and her trustee are empowered to use this if they act jointly. The trustee is Robert Foljambe, a cousin of her mother's. He has three or four times refused, even at Miss Delamere's urging, to put this money under her father's control. I have been to see him since I received this letter. I was with him, in fact, the day before yesterday. He wants to refund what Delamere borrowed, and I told him that for the time being, until I could take advice about it, I should decline to give him any particulars.'

'How much,' I asked, 'did Delamere borrow? Don't answer me unless you meant to tell me.'

'I meant to tell you,' Pole answered, 'because the amount happens to be the vital part of the whole affair. He borrowed just

three thousand pounds. If it had not been for Lord Worborough's death it would have crippled me to lend it. I did not and I could not count on that, but I got the money, and I let him have it.'

'And what did you think of him?' I asked.

'Oh,' he replied, 'it would take a good deal to change my opinion of Mr. Delamere. Foljambe,' he added, 'is as honourable a man as you can find, but he's as poor as a rat, and has seven children, all girls. If he could, I believe he would pay the money for Miss Delamere's sake, but that's out of the question. Now, I want your advice in the matter. What am I to do?'

I dare say there are people to whom this may appear a very simple problem, but I found it one of the utmost difficulty. It seemed, on the one hand, that it would be an altogether shameful and brutal thing on the part of a millionaire, under any pressure in the world, to take the last penny of the

woman he loved. Put in that way, the thing looked preposterous and incredible. It was unthinkable, impossible. It was out of the question. Then, on the other hand, Mary Delamere was smarting under as bitter a humiliation as a woman of high spirit could be called upon to endure. To her, I could see plainly, it would be ten times more terrible to face Pole's refusal of the money than to endure the poverty its payment would entail upon her. She would carry the sting of that humiliation always, unless her offer were accepted. It looked impossible that a high-minded man should insult her by its refusal. The old Greeks, who were fond of foolish puzzles, had one which posed this question:—When the irresistible meets the impregnable, what happens? It is easy enough to respond that the irresistible ceases to be irresistible when it meets the impregnable, and that the impregnable ceases to be the impregnable when assaulted by the irresistible. But here, for once in my life's

history, I seemed to be set in sight of the two, and was likely, I began to think, to have a bad time of it between them. How should I counsel Pole to insult the one creature he held most dear in the world? How could I counsel him to reduce her to poverty?

I got an inspiration on a sudden, and thought I saw a way of evading the difficulty.

'Clearly,' I said, 'you can't take the money, and clearly, you have actually got to take it.'

'That is a brutal exhibition of the actual facts,' said Pole. 'I have seen those two contradictory positives staring me in the face ever since I got this letter.'

'Very well,' I said, 'you must do neither, and do both. Delamere is not a very lofty person, and he will be glad to exchange his daughter's contempt for his own. As I judge him, he won't greatly mind despising himself, and will very strongly object to

any other living creature taking the same line.'

'My judgment goes with yours,' Pole answered. 'What do you propose to do?'

'Imprimis, you don't want the money? It can make no difference in the world to you to have or not to have it.'

'No difference in the world.'

'Well,' I continued, feeling vicariously ashamed for the specious piece of meanness I was plotting for another man's performance, 'Delamere cannot in all probability have spent the whole of the sum he borrowed. Give him your cheque for a thousand pounds. Make him draw a cheque payable to you for the same amount against it. Let him forward that to Miss Delamere with instructions to send it on to you through her lawyers. Then in three months' time send him five hundred to be employed in the same way, and so on until the whole debt is paid. It's a fraud, but it's a pious fraud, and, so far as I see, it's the only way

out of the difficulty. You can complete your share of it by writing to the lawyers and saying that the debt is in rapid process of repayment, and can leave Delamere to such gentlemanly, dignified, and high-spirited flourishes as his nature craves.'

'Denham!' cried Pole, 'you are a rogue of genius. What might you have done if you had devoted that splendid intelligence for fraud to the purpose for which it was bestowed upon you?' He had brightened at my plan, but his face fell suddenly.

'What is it?' I asked him.

'You have forgotten one thing,' he returned. 'The good man earns no money. He toils not, neither does he spin. If we excite Miss Delamere's suspicions the fraud is useless.'

'He must be made to spin,' I answered. 'He is a great draw as a lecturer. Let him lecture to his soul's content. He will flourish about that too, and perhaps be able to restore Miss Delamere's good opinion of

him—though that would be a fraud with a vengeance.'

'She would be the happier for it,' Pole said, with a reflective melancholy in his voice. 'She would be the happier for it. She has need of somebody to believe in. I think I can manage Delamere,' he continued. 'Of course he'll pretend that he's going to pay me afterwards, and if he likes to salve his conscience that way I can make no objection. Of course it wasn't very lofty in him to want to borrow the money from me, and I wish he could have kept it from Miss Delamere's knowledge. We must do our best to rehabilitate him in her eyes.'

In this manner our plan was laid, and though I have had more than a score of years in which to reflect upon it, I cannot say that I have even yet arrived at any definite conclusions about its moral aspect so far as we two were concerned. Pole, who was staying at Meurice's Hotel, asked me to go there and dine with him, and since it was

a Saturday, and therefore a journalistic holiday, I consented. After dinner we concocted a letter to Delamere, setting the facts of the case before him with a frankness which I fancied he was likely to find distasteful. This done, Pole wrote a short letter to the lawyers, saying simply that the amount of Mr. Delamere's indebtedness to him was three thousand pounds, adding that he thoroughly appreciated the motives which dictated the inquiry, and that he sincerely hoped that no action whatever would result from his response to it. The letter to Delamere enclosed a cheque for a thousand pounds.

Thackeray has accustomed everybody with the slightest turn for self-examination to an irritating, tolerably constant inquiry as to whether he is, or is not, a snob. Was I ever so little of a snob, I wonder, when I caught myself admiring the pike-and-sabre signature and the bluntly-written 'One thousand pounds,' and did I, or did I not,

feel a British flush of pride in the reflection that my closest friend was a peer of the realm and a millionaire? I know I can honestly say that I valued Pole himself neither less nor more because of these qualifications. But if I had a mind to be honest I might plead guilty to a little better appreciation of myself because of them. I can blush now to remember what I thought about what the waiters might think about me, when I dined in such intimacy of companionship with the wealthy Lord Worborough. But I was hardly five-and-twenty, and I can find excuses for myself.

After dinner we drew up our chairs beside the log fire and had a long and unrestrained talk. There was a hard black frost upon the ground without, and a high wind was blowing, so that there was comfort in the very sputtering of the wood, and the warm glow was grateful. I asked what news there was of his wife, and he told me simply that he had taken matters into his own hands.

He had written to her at the address Goldsmith had given, telling her that her plot had been discovered, and that hereafter, in order to keep her within his knowledge, he should send her allowance in a weekly cheque. He had placed no control upon her movements, but had left her to choose what habitat she pleased. As for Goldsmith, Pole had left that worthy to digest his own reflections, and make what he could of his losses. The little Jew had maintained his fellow-conspirator from the time of her supposed death until the date of her discovery, and was probably some hundred and fifty pounds out of pocket as the result of his nefarious scheme.

'I don't think it likely,' said Pole, 'that he will proceed either against my wife or me for the recovery of the money.' He added that he had received no word of answer, but that the cheques had been presented, and bore his wife's signature. 'And now, Jack,' he went on, 'I have something to say that

concerns you personally. Poor old Worborough took a prodigious liking to you, and he and I talked about you a good deal in the last month or two of his lifetime. He stood very high with his party, and had considerable influence. He proposed to me that he should use it in your behalf, and before he died he had got things in train. In four months' time an appointment will be open for your acceptance. If you don't care to take it you can have a second choice a month later. Number one is a sinecure, or thereabouts. It will bring you in fifteen hundred pounds a year, confine you to London whilst Parliament is sitting, bring you a pension after sixteen years of *dolce far niente*, and it opens up no avenue to distinction. Number two takes half the salary and, say roughly, a thousand times the labour. It opens the way to almost any ambition. There's no political difference to hold you back, and you can have which you please.'

I thanked him warmly, and told him, what

I knew very well, that though he charged the old lord with these benevolent intentions towards myself, it was he who had inspired them.

'Well,' he said, with one of his rare, bright smiles, 'I didn't let the fire go out for want of fuel. Which do you go for, the fifteen hundred with nothing to do, or the hard work and the eight hundred? Don't be in a hurry to play Quixote, Jack. If you were a fiery young politician eager for a chance you might be tempted by the smaller salary and the wider field of ambition. If you choose that, you will have little time for literary labours, and by and by, in all probability, you'll get rapt away from them altogether. In the other case you have a chance that falls to few men of following your own bent and doing your own work in the world.'

That was a very delightful prospect, and the bait looked tempting, but I recalled certain burning prose passages of my own

which, to my infinite pride and delight, had found their way into the columns of the *Reamleigh Weekly Banner* some half-dozen years before. In these early effusions I had been most savagely satirical and denunciatory about the wicked and contemptible idlers who fattened on the life-blood of the starving poor. I had been amazingly in earnest. One gets amazingly in earnest at the age of eighteen or nineteen, and wonders later in life at the pother one made in those enthusiastic days, and the sound and fury. I told Pole, with an ingenious blush, of the attitude I had taken with regard to this question.

'Well, my boy,' he answered, 'your past deeds may rise against you, and some future demagogue in his first pair of trousers may scathe you by a reproduction of your own fervour in the columns of that same journal. It has a world-wide circulation, I believe.'

I answered that it might be world-wide for all I knew, but that the circulation in

my day was limited to some two hundred copies.

'In that case,' Pole responded, 'the inhabitants of the whole planet may not yet be infected with these radical notions. Slip into the berth, Denham, and be snug there before the storm evoked by your own utterances shall burst upon your head.'

I wanted time and chance to think. I had no taste or liking for active politics, and I had a conscientious objection to the acceptance of public money without an equivalent being given for it. I was conscious that this objection had lost greatly in force within the last half-hour. I began to feel that if another man had accepted that tempting sinecure I should have been very mild in my condemnation of him. I even began to think that if the imaginary other man had great ideas boiling in his head which for want of time and ease would be lost to the world, he would be, after a fashion, criminal in refusing the

position. The acceptance of a sinecure grew infinitely less objectionable in aspect than it had ever seemed before.

'I can see where your thoughts are travelling,' said Pole, evincing less penetration than he commonly displayed. 'Don't be foolish, Denham. Take the chance that comes to you, and accept things as they are. The world is very much out of joint, I dare say, but the cursed spite, as Hamlet calls it, only comes in when the man who wasn't made for any such adventure thinks that he was born to set it right. There the post stands, waiting to be filled. Somebody will have it, as like as not a fellow infinitely less worthy than yourself. Nobody will get it as the reward of private merit or public virtue; and in plain English, if my advice has any weight with you, you're an ass if you throw it over. Take it, and marry your sweetheart, and settle down and write your books in comfort. You think you'd be doing more of your duty if you took the worse berth of the

two? Vain dog! What will your political efforts do for the country? Some fellow made for the rough-and-tumble of politics will take it and make it a stepping-stone to fortune, and have a baronetcy. You're not cut out for that kind of life. Come, the berth's going, going, going——'

'Gone!' I said.

If I had any conscientious qualms about that sinecure after this acceptance of it, I smothered them as remorselessly as the wicked Richard smothered the tender little innocents in the Tower. I dare say other men have had similar scruples on like occasions, and have prescribed just the same murderous remedy for their own disquiet. There are men in the world who would have risen in hot indignation against such a proposal as I accepted. I have heard them say so. I have a sort of memory that I said something to that effect myself in the columns of the *Reamleigh Weekly Banner*. I am not the hero of this narrative, and even

if my acceptance of the position offered to me were unheroic, I came down on to the plain, level highway of life into excellent company, and found quite a crowd of good fellows there before me.

CHAPTER XXVI

I LOST but little time in letting my English chief know of the surprising good fortune which, by Pole's kindness, had overtaken me, and I soon found myself liberated from my post in Paris. MacIlray, I am inclined to think, regarded me with a kind of awe from the moment at which I announced to him the news of my social advancement. When one day Lord Worborough's black-edged visiting-card found its way to those lofty offices in the Rue de la Paix, the good Scot retired to a little apartment of his own, and there furbished himself with hair brushes and clothes brush, and then returning, possessed himself of a pair of gloves. He had evidently an idea of putting them on in order

to receive a peer of his native realm in befitting state, but Pole entering before he could put this purpose into execution he stowed them away in his coat-tail pockets, and offered his congratulations on the nobleman's accession to wealth and title with an almost hysteric alacrity and effusion. Awaking to the fact that Pole had not come upstairs on horseback, was accompanied by no herald bearing a coat-of-arms, and was, in fact, in no way changed from the rather sad-mannered, simple gentleman he knew already, he grew more sober in demeanour.

'I had a kyind of fear upon me,' he told me afterwards, 'that the lad would be transmogrified out of knowledge, and he's not the least bit altered. Ah'm thenkin' that ef any magical pooer laid a hold upon me and made a millionaire and a loard o' me, I'd just be a spectacle for goads and men. I'll be thankful to them to leave me in my native obscurity. I'm best where I am.'

He showed a tendency to alter his de-

meanour towards myself, and falling shortly after this speech into one of his accustomed reveries, and emerging from it with his customary 'Ay, ay!' he checked himself at the habitual 'lad,' and substituted for it 'Mr. Denham.' I laughed at first, but I soon found out that MacIlray meant no more by this than to intimate that if I were not prepared under my own changed conditions to continue on the old familiar terms, he was prepared to abandon them. I do not suppose for a moment that he formulated this to himself, but he felt it all the same and acted upon it, until his Scottish sense of independence was assuaged by the certainty that no overwhelming sense of my own grandeur had run away with me.

When I finally bade good-bye to my Paris duties he was extremely warm and friendly.

'Ye're a very fine, unaffected pair o' lads, the both o' ye,' he said. 'I'm not looking forward to a dwalling in the tents of prences for my own part, nor to set down with the

great ones o' the airth. I'd be clean spoiled if I had a notion of it, I know very well that I would. And you two, that are younger in the warld's ways than I am, are just as natural as death, though ye stand there with all your blushing honours thick upon ye.'

As a matter of fact, I had no mean inward idea of the worldly importance which the possession of that wicked sinecure would confer upon me; and if I did not crow about it, it was only because I was restrained by the fact that the post was gained by no merit of my own.

I say I had lost no time in conveying information to my chief, but there was one person to whom I wrote even earlier. I had no sooner left Pole on that memorable, unforgettable evening than I fell to work to construct the terms of a letter to Mrs. Grantley. I rehearsed the letter all the way home, and wrote it immediately on reaching my chambers. Before I could get away from Paris, or my successor was appointed, I received

a letter of congratulation from mamma, who withdrew all objection to my suit, and assured me that she had never entertained any but such as were prompted by the consideration of my youth and the limited character of my worldly prospects. She exhorted me to new efforts in my new calling, and seemed to think that I had undertaken what might have been an eighth labour for Hercules.

My first business was to see the chief of my department, to whom I carried a letter of introduction from Pole. He was a genial old gentleman with a courtesy title, and he had been a life-long friend of the late Lord Worborough. He was very kind in his manner, and he talked about my duties, which were to be within reach of two subordinate personages between the hours of eleven and three for five days in the week and six months of the year. The duties of these subordinates were to be within reach of their subordinates from ten till four. My chief's duty was, in an easy-minded and un-

settled way, to be in reach of me. I praise the bridge that carried me over. It was a pleasant office, and, mockery apart, there was just enough work to do in it to prevent one from feeling like an actual impostor. I learned this afterwards, but for the moment my one desire was to get down to Grantley Holme and claim Clara. We corresponded every day. We wrote reams of letters, but the consolations of the post are but a poor substitute for the actual presence of your sweetheart, and I made all possible haste to join her.

I went down to Cheshire, and came back in a day or two, accompanied by Mrs. Grantley and the Major, a soldierly and gallant gentleman, and Clara. The three took up their abode at an hotel, and I lived in Pole's chambers. We spent days in house-hunting, and having found a perfect little jewel of an establishment, we spent weeks, and very happy weeks they were, in the search and purchase of furniture. Both Clara and I

were resolved not to give ourselves into the hands of the demon upholsterer, and, with due regard to the sentiments of mamma, who had excellent taste, we pleased ourselves in the decoration of our home.

It had been decided that our marriage should take place when the house was ready. There were one or two good reasons for this despatch, and there was nothing whatever to be urged against it. Naturally enough, I was eager for it, and I urged with some tact, as I flattered myself, that my duties would begin in three months' time, and I should have no chance of a honeymoon for at least six months further. Why not utilise the time now in hand?

'You give me credit for no motherly desire to retain my daughter,' said Mrs. Grantley.

I said nothing of the fact that my charming future mother-in-law had already managed to live without her daughter for a full year and a half, but Clara supplied the omission.

The conflicts of mother and daughter amused me often, but I had sense enough to avoid participation in them, and they always said the keenest and plainest things to each other, with an amiable good-humour and mutual understanding.

The Major had hired a carriage, and one day we all drove eastward to the Strand. At the top of one of the riverward-running streets the carriage halted.

'We will call for you in half an hour,' said Mrs. Grantley; and Clara, tapping my hand with a gloved forefinger, motioned to me to alight. I rose to obey, but I suppose I looked inquiry, for Mrs. Grantley demanded to know if I had not been told where I was wanted to go.

'Not yet,' said Clara, and the word being given to the coachman, the carriage rolled away. Clara passed a hand through my arm, and led me down the street, towards the river.

'We are going to see Mary Delamere,'

she said. 'I have been here three times already. Your duty, if you please, is to act like a good *fiancé*, and second all my proposals.'

I promised that I would do so, not being greatly in the dark as to what they were likely to be. The street was not inviting to look at. It wore an air of middle-class respectability grown sordid, and no house-painter seemed to have visited it for half a generation. But behold, on a sudden there gleamed upon us a house of mellow newness, with the neatest and whitest of curtains and blinds, and door knob and knocker of burnished brass, so refulgent with constant polish that they might have been taken for gold. The snowy doorsteps cried aloud with a voice of reproach to the whole neighbourhood. I rapped, with the highly-polished little brass knocker, at Clara's bidding, and in a minute, with a smiling, rosy-cheeked alacrity, a girl of eighteen, or thereabouts, in the costume of a *religieuse*, opened the

door. She greeted Clara pleasantly, as if they were already known to each other, but regarded me somewhat shyly and doubtfully, as if the intrusion of the male element were a thing unheard of in her experience of the place, and not to be too kindly looked upon as an experiment. Clara asked for Sister Constance, and the small nun-like personage led us into a fresh-looking, sparely-furnished apartment of infinite order and cleanliness.

'Who is Sister Constance?' I asked, when we were left alone here for a while.

'Sister Constance,' Clara answered, 'is Mary Constance Delamere.'

I asked, in some consternation, if she had taken the veil, but a smiling shake of the head was the only answer I received, for at that moment a large and motherly woman in conventual garb sailed into the room like a breeze. She also was known to Clara, and exchanged friendly greetings with her.

'Sister Constance,' she said, 'will be here in a moment or two.'

She invited us to be seated, and said something about the weather, so brightly and breezily that the air of the room seemed the fresher for it. Mary Delamere came in almost directly, and submitted to be hugged and kissed by Clara, who received her with a voluble and tender vehemence, whilst the elder lady looked on smiling. I had had a sort of general notion that all human emotions, except for a kind of tranquil, cold pity for human troubles in general, were left out of doors; but the elderly lady smiled as if she were well pleased, and Sister Constance endured and returned the caresses lavished upon her in precisely her old manner. If it is not profane to say it, the garb of this harmless and helpful society became her very much indeed. Her pale looks were warmed a little by their neighbourhood with the contrasting black and white. She greeted me in a friendly fashion, and we all four sat down to talk together.

'The Sister Superior,' said Clara glibly,

indicating the elderly lady by a little bow, 'knows already why we are here, and will have no objection to the proposal I am going to make. Mr. Denham is also aware of it, and has adopted it with the enthusiasm which might have been expected from him. We shall be at home and settled down in eight weeks' time.' She blushed at this, delightfully to my thinking, and Sister Constance and the Sister Superior smiled like an average brace of ladies well pleased, and looked no more like their costume than a country June like a London November. 'You can carry on your good work,' Clara continued, 'without let or hindrance. Mr. Denham knows all about the London poor. He is quite an authority now about their condition, and he can tell you that there are crowds of them in our neighbourhood, and that there is hardly anybody to look after them. You will be able to work amongst them, and so far as my own duties will allow me'—she was more matronly here than her

own mother—'I shall be charmed to take a part in your work. Besides that, John will be engaged in his new duties. Mr. Denham,' she explained to the Sister Superior, 'has accepted an appointment under Government —from eleven to three. That is to say, that from half-past ten to half-past three I shall be alone, and I want to know what I am to do with all those dreary hours if you won't come and help me to pass them profitably. There are some people,' she addressed the Superior once more, 'who might perhaps tell you that I am frivolous. I shall always deny that. But even if it were true, it would only be an additional argument why Mary should come to me.'

'We think your offer very generous and affectionate,' said the Superior in her own crisp yet motherly fashion; 'and for my part I like you very much for it, my dear. It remains for Sister Constance herself to decide.'

'I shan't, I can't, and I won't be happy without her,' said Clara. 'If Mr. Denham will speak his mind he will say precisely what I do.'

I spoke my mind warmly, and said with truth that I should be sincerely grateful to Miss Delamere if she would do what Clara asked her. The 'Sister Constance' stuck somehow on my tongue, and I could not rid myself of a slight but irreverent impatience of it. The elderly lady looked towards her, awaiting her decision.

'You know, dear,' Mary began, 'that if I refuse, it is not because——'

'But you shall not refuse,' cried Clara, with a face and voice of dismay. 'I shall think it an absolute cruelty if you refuse.'

'You see, dear,' Mary answered gently, 'you must see, that I cannot consent to become a burden upon you——'

'A burden upon me,' Clara answered, spreading her hands abroad and turning on the Superior with a look of resignation to

unmeasured wrong. 'Did you ever hear anything like that?' the gesture said. 'I actually lived,' she continued with excellent hypocrisy, 'in Miss Delamere's house for the greater part of two years, and now she refuses to live in mine. I shall think it cruel if you dream of refusing me,' she added, turning anew to Mary, 'I shall think it unfriendly. I shall never believe again that you care for me at all. It's of no use,' she was back at the Superior again, 'to talk to Sister Constance of her own happiness or her own welfare. Those are quite absurd considerations to her mind. And she has been housekeeping all her life and I have had no experience. There are a thousand things I want to learn, and she will leave me to kill my husband with rheumatic fever through unaired linen, or poison him with an indigestion.' There was a cold tragedy in this announcement which might have touched the most obdurate heart. Mary was evidently anxious to speak, and had

already made two or three movements in that direction; but Clara would not permit her to be heard. 'I am willing,' she went on, 'to leave it all in the hands of the Sister Superior. You are not so undisciplined and so hardened in your own opinions that you will refuse to follow her advice. I am sure that she will support my petition.'

The artful young person, as it afterwards appeared, had arranged with the Sister Superior beforehand. That motherly, good creature smiled, and answered that, really, she thought that Sister Constance could hardly be better employed. The matter was, of course, entirely for her own consideration. But—The pause and the gesture were alike significant.

'If I could be useful to you,' Mary began—

'Useful!' cried Clara. 'You'll be invaluable. Oh, thank you, darling.' She ran at her with impetuous haste, and laid

hold of both her hands. 'I never thought you could refuse, but you don't know what a load you have lifted from my mind.'

'But,' began Mary, smiling, 'I haven't promised.'

'There!' cried Clara piteously. 'It's all to begin over again. You *have* promised—with a sudden new vivacity. 'You have! You have!' Then turning brokenly to me, 'Now, John, has she not promised?'

Since the Sister Superior had expressed her opinion upon the matter I had hardly regarded the situation as being doubtful. She interposed again at this point, and carried the day for the petitioners.

'Suppose,' she said, 'that you give your friend the benefit of your experience for half a year. You need not lay aside the work you have taken to heart. You will be doing a good action, I am sure.'

Clara poured out thanks upon her ally, and new entreaties upon Mary. I joined my own, and just as the Major's carriage rumbled

over the cobbled pavement to the door, the treaty was concluded.

Certain telegraphic signs passed between Clara and her mother before the carriage had borne us back to the Strand, and the elder lady was evidently almost as much gratified as the younger. She had her daughter's interests at heart, but she was quite willing that so excellent a mistress as Mary Delamere should save her the trouble of initiating Clara into the details of housekeeping. For my part I was in my own way as satisfied as either. If I had had my world to choose from, and to search for a friend and companion to my wife that was to be, I should have chosen Mary Delamere. To have absolutely what you would have chosen is a fortunate thing, and I reckoned myself and Clara very happy in this matter.

In due course, the banns being already put up, the guests were invited, and we two young people got married, and went away

for a six weeks' sojourn in Elysium. We spent our moon and a half of honey in the Riviera, and then came back to settle down in smoky London with Mary Delamere as my wife's companion.

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT section of the great world which lived by faith in old china was deeply stirred by the news that the eminent art critic's collection was about to be offered for sale by public auction. Jones, who came now and again to see us in our new home, was actually pathetic about the threatened dissipation of an assortment which had cost so much skill, and patience, and money in the gathering. Not only the crockery ware, but the bronzes, the Japanese lacquers, the Eastern ivories, the rare engravings, rare editions, and rare coins, were all going. The chief passion of this tragedy to Jones's mind was that certain pictures of the Italian school, which had never been brought together

before, and which illustrated a certain development and phase of art, would have, in all probability, to be sold separately, and might be scattered the wide world over. He wrote letters to the daily papers about this, and was as sad and angry over the laxity of the Government in not securing this treasure for the nation as Jeremiah was in his day concerning the backslidings of his people. I have no doubt that, to people learned in such matters, these works possessed a high value of their own; but to the uninitiated, who cared for art-work chiefly because of its beauty, they could hardly have been less pleasing than they were. It is always dangerous to attack the enthusiastic specialist, and I was careful to disguise my own ignorance and to leave Jones alone.

Delamere had expended quite a considerable fortune in amassing his collection, and had, in fact, been impoverished by it. He had for years past paid to the insurance companies a larger annual sum than it would

have cost him to live in *bourgeois* comfort and to indulge in those commoner signs of wealth which he despised. The house in Cromwell Terrace was dismantled, and bronzes, books, coins, ivories, pictures, and china were all ranged, catalogued, and exposed to view in the rooms of a great West End auctioneer famous for his knowledge of such things and his conduct of their sale. Such part of fashion as was at that season of the year to be found in town thronged the rooms daily, and valetudinarian collectors were borne swiftly home from remote health resorts to be present at the sale. Many of the objects were beautiful even to the eye of ignorance; and to the learned there was nothing in the whole extensive collection which had not some high special value, beauty, or interest of its own.

Clara and I went to see the collection. The rooms were almost empty when we got there, for the first flush of public interest was over; but at the far end of the long

chamber in which the principal treasures were exposed to view I saw and recognised the stately figure of Mr. Delamere. I could not help glancing at him from time to time as he wandered hither and thither amongst his belongings, as if taking mute and mournful farewell. He saw us at length and came over to us, looking extremely dignified and stately, as a martyr might if he were let out on bail the night before an Auto-da-fé.

'You know my little collection already, Denham,' he said, with a gentle, noble sadness. 'There were many larger, even amongst the private treasures of the world, but not many so complete within its own limited lines. A life-long interest in these things, a life-long study, enabled me to acquire many objects of interest and value which wealthier collectors were compelled to pass for want of money. This intaglio, for instance, cost me a mere thirty pounds. It may realise ten times that sum to-morrow.'

He told me all about the object to which he drew my attention, gave me a little sketch of its history, of the life of the artist who brought it into being, and of the special artistic purpose it served in relation to the rest. On a point like this he always knew how to be charming. For, whatever else he pretended, I never knew anybody bold enough to charge him with inaccuracy or ignorance about the precious objects in his possession. He had spent his life in learning all that was to be known of them, and all the enthusiasm and feeling of which he was capable were expended on them.

'I would fain have kept these things,' he told me, looking about him with his air of mournful dignity. 'It is a wrench to part with them, but I can afford to keep them no longer. It is too much to hope that all of them will fall into good hands. The newly rich begin to hanker after these possessions, and many of them are so sadly ignorant that one fears, one fears.'

I waited for him to make some inquiry about Mary, and did not for one moment imagine that he knew nothing of her present whereabouts. I made no allusion to her, and he made none. He had been too much occupied, as I found out afterwards, in the classification of his belongings, and too much saddened at the thought of parting from them, to find time for mere domestic considerations. Clara, after lingering for a little time, had continued her round of observation alone. She had been very cool in her manner towards him, but Mr. Delamere did not seem to have noticed that. His heart was in the coffin there with his crocks and other bric-à-brac, and he must needs wait until it came back to him.

On the third day of the sale we went again, and bought two or three of the least expensive trifles, partly to have some record of the home in which Clara had lived so long, and partly because they were the things that had pleased her most. Delamere him-

self was there, and was buying in some remnant of his own, for the sale had achieved an unexpected and surprising success, and it was a matter of common rumour that the proceeds had at least doubled the estimate of the auctioneer. Delamere was well-to-do again. He had impoverished himself by his purchases and by the prodigious insurance-money he was compelled to pay, and now it turned out that he could hardly have made a more fortunate investment of his money. For years after people learned in such matters quoted the prices realised at the sale of the Delamere collection. Even now one hears casual mention made of them at times.

A week or two after the sale the bereaved gentleman found time to think about his daughter, and to discover her present whereabouts. He made a solemn call upon us, and inquired after her welfare. Clara at first was indisposed to meet him, but I succeeded in persuading her that it was better to do

so, and after a little time she succumbed to argument and entreaty. When I entered the room in which Delamere waited he was bending caressingly over a Dresden shepherdess which had not long ago been one of the least-prized objects in his own possession.

'She is divorced from her surroundings, poor thing!' he said, with a mournful smile; 'divorced from her surroundings. By the way, Denham, I learn that you have given an asylum to my daughter.'

This was a little startling. The divorced shepherdess really seemed the more important personage of the two.

'Miss Delamere is visiting us,' I answered, 'and is so good as to give Mrs. Denham some lessons in housekeeping.'

'That,' said Mr. Delamere, with eyebrows raised in mingled allowance and astonishment, 'is not a position I should have thought her willing to occupy.'

This staggered me so completely that for

a moment I could only stare at him. I told him then, and I am afraid that I told him somewhat hotly, that his daughter was with us as an esteemed and honoured guest. He put on his gold-rimmed pince-nez, and said smilingly that I was an enthusiast.

'You have a warm and impetuous nature, Denham—a warm and impetuous nature. Is Mary within doors?'

It was nearing five o'clock, and she was expected momently. I told him that she might be expected immediately, and added that she spent most of her time amongst her poor.

'Her poor?' he asked. 'She has that fancy still. Well, well.'

Clara came in at this point, and she and Delamere met with an icy courtesy by no means comfortable to witness.

'I learn from your husband, Mrs. Denham,' he said, sinking gracefully into a chair, 'that Mary is labouring amongst the poor. I should suppose that, with her

breeding and inherited instinct, she finds that self-imposed office at times a little trying.'

'My dear Mr. Delamere,' Clara responded, 'we cannot all spend our lives in the contemplation of the beautiful.'

'No, no,' Delamere assented. He saw as clearly as I did that my wife was a partisan, and likely to fight in the interests of her own side if she had but the slightest provocation that way. 'There are sterner duties in the world.'

'Indeed there are,' said Clara, with perhaps unnecessary warmth of emphasis.

'I should be the last to deny it,' he answered smoothly. 'One or two of us live out of the hurlyburly of the plains, and invite sometimes a casual eye to our surroundings. The rest go their way in pursuit of meaner needs——'

'All of them?' Clara asked, flushing at his tone.

'Is there,' he asked in turn, 'any nobler

or more elevating employment than the pursuit of beauty? Is it not at least worth while that a few should devote themselves to that pursuit; should strive to show the world at large that beauty and utility are not antagonistic; that the simpler and less elevated forms of life need not necessarily be sordid?'

'The world is a big place, Mr. Delamere,' said this truculent wife of mine, 'and there is room enough in it for some of all kinds of people. There may be room, perhaps, even for a young woman who goes about nursing the sick poor.'

'Room!' cried Delamere, avoiding combat. 'Room, indeed! Who denies honour to the social martyr? The heart is touched, the sympathies are fired, by the contemplation of a thousand silent heroisms.'

Now this was too bold a taking away of the mouse from pussy's claws to be endured with patience.

'Give me,' said Clara, 'the people who

live in the hurlyburly of the plain, as you call it. The soldier who fights for his country, the poor man who breaks his back over his spade, the chimney-sweeper who sweeps a chimney honestly——'

'My dear Clara,' said Delamere, 'I would give you a chimney-sweeper gladly if I had one. I have no taste in chimney-sweepers, and if such a person were upon my hands I would part with him willingly to any lady who might choose to ask for him.'

'That is a poor retort,' said Clara, 'from a conversational fencer so skilful as yourself.'

'Ah, really,' said Delamere, with a smile, 'if we are to take off the buttons from our foils and fight in earnest, I decline the combat.'

'Out of pure pity, one supposes?'

'Out of pure fear,' he answered.

'I do not think,' she said, with a little indrawing of breath and a slight pinching of the nostrils, 'that either of us would hurt the other much.'

'I am sure,' he answered, half rising to bow to her, 'that neither of us would desire to hurt the other.'

What end this fencing bout would have found had it been continued I can hardly say, though I fancy that a scratch or two might possibly have resulted on both sides. It was ended by the entrance of the chief cause of conflict. She came in with her pale cheeks somewhat flushed with exercise, and her eyes, which were commonly sadder than one liked to see them, brightened by the same cause. She started when she saw her father, and Delamere for his part cast a horror-stricken glance at her costume. He was evidently quite unprepared for it, as she was for his visit.

'I had not expected to find you here,' said Mary.

Her manner was grave and reserved, but it was easy to see that she was inwardly agitated by the encounter.

'Do not leave us, Mrs. Denham,' said

Delamere, seeing my wife make a movement towards the door.

Then he moved across to his daughter.

'Pray allow me to offer you a chair, my dear. You will stay with us, Denham. Thank you. I have something to say which, as it seems to me, demands to be said in the hearing of all here present.'

In spite of his invitation Mary remained standing, but she laid her hand upon the rail of the chair he had placed for her. I noticed that it trembled as she set it down, but she waited for what her father might have to say with a look of calm attentiveness.

'I think,' said Delamere, 'that I am not mistaken in supposing that the cause of severance between you and me is known, or guessed, by Denham and his wife.'

'Not a word has been spoken between Mary and myself upon the subject,' said Clara. 'I can't pretend not to know it, but I know nothing of it through her.'

'I should have believed that of my

daughter,' returned Delamere, 'even without your authority. It would be futile in a man who has just made public confession of his poverty to pretend to delicacy in a case like this, with respect to bygone financial embarrassments. I have never had much knowledge of business, and I have proved now to my own satisfaction that I have a rather curious incapacity for it. My old friend Chetwynd, who was in the habit of advising me, died half a dozen years ago, and since that time I have tried to manage my own affairs. The world is not made up of honest and high-minded people. I was plundered on all hands, and but for the little collection of artistic treasures with which I had surrounded myself I should have been almost beggared.'

He delivered all this with a sort of proud humility, as if he took it, as I really believe he did, as a sort of distinction to be ignorant of business affairs. He reserved himself from boasting of it, but that was only because he would not boast of anything.

'In these conditions,' he continued, 'a gentleman, for whom I had never professed any especial sympathy or regard, made me an offer of pecuniary assistance. He did it in a manner most unexpectedly delicate and friendly. I accepted his assistance. There were circumstances which made that acceptance so distasteful to my daughter that she left her father's roof.'

Apart from a certain dignified querulousness which he had sometimes shown, I had never seen a touch of emotion in him until now. He quavered a little on the final words of this portion of his speech, and made a motion as if to draw out his handkerchief. He put this impulse by, however, and went on again with a complete resumption of his common manner.

'I was enabled, by an unlooked-for occurrence, to repay a portion of the loan much sooner than I had dared to hope. I was the more rejoiced at this inasmuch as my daughter had made arrangements to engulf

the whole of her own very small fortune in the immediate repayment of the borrowed money. My purpose in coming here now is to place in your hands, Mary, a cheque for the balance of the loan, and to request that you will forward it to the solicitors of your trustee.'

He unbuttoned his frock-coat and produced a pocket-book, from which he took the cheque he spoke of. Mary accepted it with a murmur of acknowledgment, and he flowed on.

'I trust that there is no feeling in your mind, my child, which will prevent us from resuming our old relations towards each other. I had not intended that you should become aware of the obligation under which I had placed myself. It was one I should have had no fear of offering had the conditions been exchanged or exchangeable, and it appears to me that a service which one honourable man may offer, another man of honour may accept. I have never, for its

own sake, regretted my acceptance of that proffered help. I regretted its discovery, and I have had reason to regret the construction which was placed upon it. Next to my own good opinion it is not unnatural, perhaps, that I should value yours. Next to that I valued the labour of my lifetime. That small monument to beauty which I had so patiently and fondly reared I have sacrificed. I have scattered it to the four winds to regain your daughterly sympathy and affection. The Delamere collection exists no longer. The labours, studies, travels, of a lifetime will leave no record to the world. I had hoped,' he continued, a little moved again by his own eloquence, 'to have bequeathed it to the nation. It was small, but in itself it was complete, and it might have taught a lesson. "Ex pede Herculem."'

Now I dare say that if we had not all three been perfectly well aware that the Delamere collection had been sold from an altogether different motive than that which Delamere

claimed, we might have been affected by his sacrifice, and have taken him to our hearts with instant affection. For my own part I should have preferred to have been miles away, for on Mary's behalf I found the scene difficult to endure.

'I am very glad,' she said, 'that the money is repaid, and I am very sorry that the collection had to be sold.'

What made the thing a little worse for me was that I knew, on the best authority, that Pole had never offered Delamere anything, or had indeed so much as known of his necessities until Delamere himself had written to him about them. I fancy, from the look his daughter gave him when he spoke of the generous offer made to him, that she shared my knowledge. It was a beseeching and frightened glance, and I read into it a prayer on her part that he would not lower himself in her eyes.

Delamere had evidently made less by his motion than he had anticipated. He

looked surprised at Mary's brief and simple answer.

'Do you leave me to conjecture,' he demanded, 'that anything in the nature of a barrier remains between us?'

'Would it not be better,' she asked, 'to talk of this when we are alone?'

Delamere reddened, and walked to the window, where he stood for a moment looking on the street. The click of the door-latch seemed to reach his ear, for he turned at the moment at which Clara and I were slipping quietly from the room.

'Denham,' he cried, in a louder voice than he often used, 'I desire your presence. Mrs. Denham, I beg you to remain.'

He strode over swiftly to us as he spoke, and holding the door so as to prevent my closing it, drew us back into the room.

'I appeal to you, Denham,' he said, then closing the door and standing with his back against it, as if to bar any further attempt at egress. 'Those who know you best speak of

you as an honourable man. I appeal to you as an honourable man to say if in this matter, in your judgment, I have done anything unbefitting.'

I have often been placed in embarrassing positions, but so far in the whole course of my life I have known nothing to equal the extreme awkwardness of that moment. I could only answer that I would infinitely prefer not to be appealed to, and that in these matters another man's opinion was quite valueless. I added that I would accept no man's judgment as to my own acts or character.

'It is Mary's wish,' said Clara decisively, putting her arm through mine as she spoke, 'to continue this conversation alone. I am sure that that is the best and wisest course. Perhaps Mr. Delamere will be so kind as to open the door. Thank you.'

Mr. Delamere opened the door, and closed it behind us, and that was the last Clara and I saw of him for a considerable time. We could hear his voice below us in stormy or

persuasive tones for something like the space of half an hour. At the end of that time he went away.

'I wish,' said Clara, 'that he would ask me for my opinion of his conduct in Mary's absence. It would be a positive relief to me to let him know it.'

Plainly, Delamere's sense of honour differed widely from that of the common run of men, and where that happens it is always a misfortune. I do not think he ever rose to a clearer conception of the case than to suspect vaguely that he *might* have acted less delicately than he would have preferred to do if he had taken time to think about it. No doubt it seemed to him that a considerable hubbub was being made about a very simple matter. It was a long time before he brought himself to forgive my preference for silence.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I HAVE already had occasion to mention a certain weekly publication which called itself a journal of society, and was the forerunner of a large and important family with which the world is now familiar. The existence of this journal was brief and stormy. Whilst it continued to appear it made a considerable noise in the world, but until it finally made so loud a bruit that it fell to pieces in the shock of sound itself created, it made no greater sensation than by its articles on 'The Buried Lady of Title.' It was a scandal-loving print, and as different from its decorous successors as chalk from cheese. Those who bought it and read its pages did so in the unfailing hope, not often disappointed, of

finding something to the disadvantage of people in high places. Its conductors had never before had so piquant, so exciting, and so strange a story to tell as this of the buried lady of title. They made the most of it, doling out the story in instalments week by week, and asseverated so stoutly that the narrative, curious as it was, was made up of simple facts, that even the most doubtful began to take a sort of speculative interest in it, and to look forward with curiosity for next week's revelations.

By whatsoever means the tale had come to the ears of the man who wrote it, there was no denying its accuracy or its completeness. The story of Pole's unfortunate hidden marriage was related in detail. No names or places were mentioned, but to one who knew the history already the identification of the people concerned was not merely easy but unescapable. The parting of the ill-assorted pair was slurred over somewhat, but from that point the narrative became once more

precise and clear. There is no need to repeat it, for it tallied with what has already been set down in these pages. The writer, loath to part with so interesting a theme, dragged it on from week to week, until at last, in large type, he announced the presence of the buried lady in London. He stated that a representative of the journal had been admitted to an interview with her, that she declared the plot to have been invented by her husband, and was prepared to take such simple and immediate steps as were necessary for the establishment of her own position.

Now this was a very remarkable statement, and if it could possibly have been true, would have been disquieting; but there was so little doubt that Pole's wife had already surrendered herself into the hands of the law that the threat of return was preposterous. The thing was evidently a *brutum fulmen*, and demanded nothing but to be left to itself. I got letters from Pole, who still lingered in Paris and had heard the news there, to this

precise effect. I wrote to him in the same strain, and it was agreed between us that there was nothing to be done but to let the rumour die.

The rumour obstinately refused to die, and coming at a season when not much in the way of public interest was stirring, it grew to be probably the commonest topic of conversation in London at that season. A startling murder chased it for a week, or nearly, but the criminal was caught, and the buried lady of title came into vogue again. Then, though the discreet journalist still found no names, the world at large got hold of them, and Lord and Lady Worborough were in all men's mouths. If Clara and I had been disposed to be as communicative upon this topic as our friends would have desired, we might, I verily believe, have made ourselves the lioness and lion of the hour. As it was, we grew rather unpopular by reason of our reticence.

Our world at large made such a pother

about the revelations of the society journalist, and appealed to me as Pole's bosom friend with so much pertinacity, that almost anybody who did not talk about this one disagreeable theme would have been welcome. Jones, who was superior to all sorts of vulgar interests, came by times, and talked upon the questions with which he particularly concerned himself. When he first appeared I was inclined to be afraid that he intended to renew his unavailing pursuit of Mary Delamere. Clara shared this belief or doubt of mine, and so I thought it best to come at once to an understanding. I invited him to my study under specious pretext of consulting him as to the authenticity of some prints I had lately purchased, and, having decoyed him thither, opened fire upon him at once.

'Jones,' I said, with the solemnity and solidity befitting a family man, 'you are aware of the fact that Miss Delamere is at present residing here.' Jones admitting this, I put it to him as gently as I could that in

his capacity of old friend Miss Delamere and ourselves would be very glad to welcome him. But—Jones took the hint with a smiling alacrity.

'Ah!' he said, 'I remember to have spoken to you about that matter in those queer old rooms of yours in Gray's Inn before anybody supposed that you were going to be one of her Majesty's commissioners, and when I seemed likelier than yourself to wear the rosy hymeneal fetters. You remember that I expressed some doubt about the wisdom of the course at the time, even though I actually proposed to embark upon it.'

I told Jones that I remembered his remarks at that time to have been characterised by his usual wisdom and excellent good taste. I had found out long ago that it was quite impossible to wound Jones in that way. No faintest suspicion of a want of sincerity in people who took that tone with him ever crossed his mind. It relieved me and left

Jones unhurt, so that there was a kind of mild double pleasure in it.

'Well,' he said, 'it is given to a happy few to blunder and not to be punished for their blunders. I was saved from the results of my own indiscretion, and I am not likely to renew it. Miss Delamere need not fear that I shall play the part of the disconsolate lover. I do not think,' he added with a conquering smile, 'that it is a rôle for which I was cast by nature. I do not think it a part in which I should be likely to shine.'

In that case, I told him, he should be welcome to the general bosom of the household. I was glad to know that he was cured, and even expressed a hope that his sufferings had not been at any time abnormally severe.

'No,' he said, with the same conquering smile, 'I think not. Do you know, Denham,' he continued in his philosophico-confidential manner, 'I have been rather devoting myself of late to the observation of the youthful male of our species. I have more especially

directed my studies to the point at which he is said to be in love. I am assuming no airs of superiority. I am quite conscious that not very long ago I trenched with a perilous nearness upon his position. But if I were not putting myself into an insolent competition with the general opinion, I should be very much inclined to say that the youthful male, absurd as he commonly and inevitably is, is more absurd at that moment than at any other of his whole foolish and futile existence.'

One never knows the truth about oneself, and I may have been as great a prig in laughing at Jones as Jones was in deserving to be laughed at. I did laugh, however, with great heartiness, and he was pleased—so pleased, in fact, that he set up as a social humorist for the rest of the evening, and exerted himself to be delightful. It was not unnatural, finding himself the cause of so much innocent and admiring hilarity, that he should make his visits pretty constant. He told me once, I remember, that he was at his best in my

society. It was not, he was good enough to say, because I lent any additional brilliance to the conversational fireworks of the evening by any effort of my own. I was receptive. I was appreciative. I gave him courage. He felt safe in my presence and knew that he was understood—not wholly, perhaps, but fairly well—lest I should grow too proud.

It happened one night when we were dining that Jones came in in evening dress to announce the possession of a box at Her Majesty's. Some considerable person of Jones's acquaintance had taken the box, and finding himself unable at the last hour to use it, had sent it to him. Would Mrs. Denham and myself accompany him? The new *prima donna*, who had taken the world by storm, was to sing that night. Royalty would be present. Jones was of course superior to the coarse, unreasoning sentiment of loyalty which touched the crowd, and yet had a furtive liking for a prince. Would we go?

The point was under discussion when a

loud double knock sounded at the front door, and a telegram was brought in to me. I asked Jones's leave to open it, and this being graciously accorded, I read it, and found that it came from Pole. He was back in town, had gone to his old chambers, and begged me earnestly to meet him there with all possible despatch. He would stay in his rooms till midnight awaiting me.

I passed the telegram to Clara, who gave a little start on reading the name by which it was signed, and a veiled glance at Mary, who sat opposite. She passed it back to me and assumed a face of comic dismay to hide, if need were, the effect the name had made upon her.

'John,' she said, 'it is too bad. I had set my heart on *Rigoletto*. Of course you must go. The business must be urgent, or he would not use such terms.'

'Could you entrust Mrs. Denham to my care,' Jones asked, 'and join us afterwards?'

'We should be leaving you alone, dear,' said my wife to Mary.

'I am not at all afraid to be left alone,' she answered, smiling. 'You must let me help you to dress. There is not much time to lose.'

So Jones's suggestion was adopted, and I, having answered Pole's dispatch, hastily changed my attire and, a hansom having been got to the door, departed, in some wonder as to the object of my friend's return and the meaning of his pressing desire to see me. It was not long before these questions found an answer. Pole was waiting for me in his rooms, and at the sound of my hurried footsteps on the stair he opened the door and admitted me.

'You must forgive me,' he began, 'for disturbing you with my affairs. You are the only man in the world who knows the whole story, and you are the only man with whom I can bear to talk about it. Sit down and look at these, and tell me what I ought to do.'

'These' were a little sheaf of bills, made out to the Countess of Worborough. Most of them were receipted—all but two, in fact—which I found at the bottom of the pile. I glanced over them hastily, and found one from a milliner, one from a jeweller, another from a jobmaster, another from an upholsterer. There were eight or nine in all, and roughly, they amounted to between two and three thousand pounds. Of this sum, fully two thousand appeared to have been paid.

'Tell me what it all means,' I said.

'Read that first,' he said with a groan, throwing a crumpled note upon the table.

It was still warm from his hand when I took it from the table, and it was so tightly pressed together in places that I had some difficulty in opening it without tearing the paper. When I had succeeded, I read in an excited-looking scrawl that the Countess of Worborough presented her compliments to the Earl of Worborough. She was informed that she had committed forgery in signing

his name to the cheques by which the enclosed bills were paid. If the Earl of Worborough chose to encounter the scandal of a prosecution, the Countess would be unfeignedly delighted. That was all.

It appeared that, by some means as yet unknown, Lady Worborough had become possessed of a cheque-book from her husband's bank, and signed his name, and being confronted by the tradesmen, had calmly announced the forgery, and had sent this note through Pole's solicitor. Two of the tradesmen had accompanied her to the lawyer's office, and all had agreed to wait for an answer from Lord Worborough himself before taking further proceedings. Pole had arrived in town that morning, had spent his day in settling the accounts, and now wanted counsel.

'It's not the money,' he said, walking agitatedly up and down the room. 'I had enough and to spare before the money came to me, and if she would only go away and

be quiet with it, she would be welcome to it every farthing. I would rather break stones at the roadside, and live on a shilling a day, than live in constant dread that this kind of scandal should be sprung upon me.'

In all my acquaintance with him I had never until now known him to lose his self-possession. But now all his old nonchalance was gone; his voice shook with shame and anger, his footsteps and his gestures were disordered, and his whole bearing was changed.

'If I gave her all I had,' he went on, 'I can guess what use she would make of it. I have half a mind to do it and take an alias, and go away to California and make a living there by my own hands.'

In a while he began to recover himself again, and he resumed, in something like his accustomed manner:

'But you see, Jack, the money isn't mine. The next heir has as good a right to it as I had. And even if it were absolutely mine,

to do as I pleased with, there are grave responsibilities attaching to the mere annual income. It's possible to do a prodigious amount of good with such a sum. It's possible to do a prodigious amount of harm. I can't run away; I can't turn tail and hide myself. You forgive me,' he said suddenly, 'for throwing my miseries on your shoulders.' He laid both hands upon me and rocked me to and fro a little after his old fashion, and then, turning away, began to pace the room again, but more slowly and despondently than before.

I told him, truly, that I wished, above all other things, to be of use to him. Could we, I asked him, decide upon anything, and could I act as his emissary?

'I tried to face the lawyer about it this afternoon,' he said, 'and I had not the courage to do it. I had to face the tradesmen, and that was shame enough for one day. She knows,' he went on, sadly desperate in voice and face, 'that I will bear

anything bearable rather than endure any public scandal which can draw another name into its ugly coils, and she presumes on that.'

'You told her once in my hearing,' I responded, 'that you held one power only over her, and that you would use it. You can make an arrangement with her—an arrangement which all men would admit to be generous, and if she will not accept that with reasonable conditions, all men will hold you justified in using your power.'

'I can threaten her with it,' he answered; 'but how can I carry the threat into action? How could I leave my wife penniless, let her do what she would?'

'Offer her,' I answered, 'a fixed allowance, on condition that she refrains in all ways from annoying you. If she refuse that allowance, you are not responsible for the refusal. The position is unhappy, but you are not helpless in it. You have only to decide and to be strong.'

'That,' said Pole, 'is the plain common-

sense of the case, and I know it as well as you do. But it is not easy to decide, nor easy to be strong. Strength and decision may end in bringing an innocent creature within reach of common gossip and offensive pity. 'I tell you,' he added passionately, 'my wife has this hold upon me, and she knows it. In her lifetime, by that horrible plot of hers, an innocent, pure-minded, high-bred woman promised to become my wife. I would rather die—I would rather go on dying every day than drag her name into publicity.'

I argued with him, long and earnestly. I showed him that until he took some such step as I counselled he could not hope for a moment to be free of annoyance, or even free of the danger of disgrace. I got him at last to assent to this proposal: That I should make it my business on the morrow to secure an interview with his wife, and to make an offer to her of an income of five thousand pounds per annum, on condition that she quitted England, and undertook in no way to molest her husband.

'Suppose,' he asked me, 'she should accept the offer and break her promise?'

'Let the agreement,' I answered, 'be drawn up by your own lawyer, and let him be answerable for your side of it. Let her be answerable for her own. No man can blame you. No man can have anything but sympathy for anybody who suffers as you do.'

So far, then, the thing was allowed to stand as if decided. The matter and the manner of an interview had afforded but a poor prelude to a night's enjoyment at the opera. But life has to be lived somehow, and it is an old commonplace that sad hearts often find themselves in haunts of pleasure. After a good deal of persuasion Pole was induced to accompany me, and when he had dressed we set out together. Jones was pleased to find a place for Lord Worborough in his box, and Clara welcomed him with evident heartiness.

We heard but little of the music, and were disturbed on more grounds than one. The audience shared a part of our disturbance,

for there was a party in the next box whose members persisted, in spite of indignant cries of 'Order!' in loud conversation and laughter. Once or twice there arose a considerable clamour, and at one moment an indignant official of the house knocked at the door of the box in which we sat, and being admitted, requested us to keep silence.

'We,' said Jones, 'are amongst the chief sufferers from the disturbance, not the creators of it. The noise comes from the next box.'

A louder burst of laughter than we had heard before confirmed the statement almost at the moment at which it was made. The indignant official melted for one moment into apology, grew instantly indignant again, and withdrew. We heard him rapping at the next door, and after this the noise became less marked, though conversation was still carried on in a higher key and with less restraint than is usual in such places.

I tried to fix my attention upon the busi-

ness of the stage, but my thoughts wandered from it persistently, and I went back in fancy to the interview just over, and forward in fancy to the business of the morrow. I disliked that coming interview less than I should have fancied, and even felt something of the glow of battle as I contemplated it. I was just resolving in my mind how uniformly courteous I would be, yet how firm and decisive, and was rehearsing the speech I meant to make, when the music, which had all the while been swelling and swelling, and no doubt helping my martial thoughts by its cadenced clash and roar, stopped suddenly as if a cataract should have ceased in full bound. A voice sprang out of the sudden silence, and every creature in the theatre must have heard it. What words came before, or what words were intended to follow afterwards, I could not guess. But the words that struck through the sudden silence were neither more nor less than these—'Lady Worborough.'

They were spoken in a shrill and ill-bred female voice, and were, as I have said, audible to every person in the theatre. People turned and stared, and there was a hubbub of cries of 'Order!' 'Shame!' and 'Silence!' and voices called from the gallery, 'Turn them out!' From that moment a hush fell upon the noisy occupants of the box, and we heard no more of them. At the sound of the words we had all turned to look at one another in a common astonishment. Pole's pale face flushed crimson, and then went gray. We sat afterwards in a confused and comfortless silence, and the final descent of the curtain was a relief to all four of us. We delayed a moment in quitting the box, and the lately noisy people, our neighbours, went out before us. Pole laid a hand upon my arm and detained me for a moment, whilst Clara and Jones passed out upon the corridor.

'She was there,' he said.

'No, no!' I answered. 'The name has been on everybody's lips for a week past.' I could

have bitten my tongue off a second later for my stupidity, but he did not seem to notice it.

'She was there,' he said. 'I heard her voice half a dozen times.'

Clara was looking brightly back at us, smiling at something Jones was saying as he arranged her cloak. She beckoned me with her fan, and we went out and joined her. The corridor and the stairs were fast emptying, but there was a crowd in the vestibule, and the usual clamour of voices sounded there. It was raining slightly out of doors, and people were pausing to put up umbrellas. We made our way through the concourse slowly, and as we came out upon the colonnade a man with a stentorian voice bellowed, 'Lady Worborough's carriage!'

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